THE SILVER COW

BY
FRANK C. ROBERTSON

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BY

FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Author of
"The Foreman of the Forty-Bar," "Boss of the Tumbling H," "The Man Branders," etc.

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THE SILVER COW

I

THE DOGY CALF

WHEN old Tony King of the K-Bar-Dash paid an emigrant a silver dollar for a heifer calf that was too big to ride in the wagon, and too weak to follow he had no idea that he was buying the biggest pack of trouble that had ever hit the Portneuf range, and, in a manner of speaking, signing his own death warrant.

"I admire yore charity, Tony, but what the hell do yuh want of a sick Jersey dogy?" demanded Joe Kidder, the owner of the JK Connected, who had been present at the transaction, and who was Tony's best friend.

It spoke well for these two men that they could both brand with the same letter and still be friends. Tony grinned as he watched the dogy calf bawling plaintively after the disappearing wagon. As the calf looked then a dollar was too high a price for it by far. It was not a Jersey as Joe Kidder had accused it of being, or at least the markings were

not apparent then, though Joe had noticed certain dark stripes in the calf's mother's red hide which indicated Jersey origin.

"If it lives a dollar ain't much, an' it's only one hundred cents if it dies," Tony said. "An' it may be the means o' savin' us a good many hundred dollars, Joe."

Kidder looked his surprise.

"I call yuh tuh witness, Joe, that this calf is my property," Tony went on, as he swung down and walked over to the wabbly animal. Unsuspecting of harm the calf stuck out its nose, and the next moment it was lying flat on its side, with old Tony easily controlling its feeble struggles.

"Gonna mark it?" Kidder asked, as he got down to help. The question was superfluous for old Tony was already getting out his knife.

"Yes, but not in the way yuh might think," Tony answered. "This dogy's goin' tuh ree-main a slick —till come o' them damn thieves that's been rustlin' our calves git their iron on it."

"I begin tuh see," Joe said doubtfully as he knelt to hold the calf down while Tony did the knife work.

Tony King was a cattleman of the old school He was the only remaining one of the original settlers of the Portneuf country. There were rumors afloat that in those early wild days his cows had a remarkable propensity for bearing twins, or even trip-

lets, but no such accusation could be made against him now. And there were none who cared to make insinuations even yet. His hair was iron gray and his mustache white, but his body was still erect, his hands steady, and his deep-set black eyes unwavering.

For a couple of years past rustlers had been active on the Portneuf range, and King and Kidder were only two among numerous cattlemen who complained that their calf crop was short.

With his keen-bladed knife old Tony cut a slit through the skin on the inner side of the calf's left front leg, and then pressed a silver half dollar deep down under the skin.

"If this calf lives an' it shows up at the round-up with somebody's brand on I reckon we'll know who these slick-ear artists are," Tony declared.

Joe Kidder only smiled. That anyone would take the trouble to steal so poor a piece of property as this calf seemed extremely unlikely.

Kidder was a relatively new comer on the range. Six years before he had come into the country and bought out Jim Lamb of the old X-L outfit. He was only thirty years of age, and as fine looking and well set up a man as could be found in any country. He had wanted to get along with his neighbors, and he had gone at once to call on Tony King. The JK Connected had been his old brand, but he had no intention of using it here if King, who had

a slightly similar brand objected. After a brief comparison of the irons King had declared that he had no objection to the JK iron, and the two had been friends ever since.

After the marking of the dogy calf the two men got on their horses and rode on down the river. Twenty minutes after they had departed the brush along the river a couple of hundred yards away was parted in one place and an ugly, leering face appeared. The man was tall and dark, obviously with Indian blood in his veins; yet just as obviously he was not of the same tribe as the fine looking Indians who lived on the neighboring reservation. He walked over to the bawling calf, caught it easily and examined it for markings. He was surprised to find no ear-marks, but he was no fool. He knew the calf had not been purchased from the emigrant for no purpose, and as he felt the animal over for marks he felt the warm, sticky blood. An evil grin spread over his face.

"So that's their game," he said aloud, with no trace of an accent.

He did not trouble to find out just what the mark was; nor did he happen to feel the coin under the skin. With an eye that could not be fooled he knew that he would be always able to identify the dogy calf anywhere he saw it.

A few hours later the breed rode through a gate and along a brush-lined road to a squatty, four

room cabin built upon an open space just above Tumbling Creek. It was only a little after dusk, but already the blinds were drawn and the lamps lighted. The breed tied his horse to the corral fence, and then knocked cautiously upon the door with three distinct raps.

"Come in," called a not unpleasant voice from within.

The breed opened the door and stepped inside with his leering grin in full play. Four men were seated around a table from which the victuals from a late meal had not yet been removed. A ten-year-old boy was playing solitaire in one corner.

"Hello, Comanche, where'd you drift from?" greeted the man who had extended the invitation to enter. He was a man who seemed rather small; yet there was a hundred and fifty pounds of him and not an ounce of excess fat. He was hard and wiry as any trained athlete, and indeed Jim Rarick had never met defeat in fighting or wrestling since he had been in the country. He was good looking in a way, his face bland and expression innocent, with nothing to denote the cold and treacherous heart he possessed. He was the father of the boy in the corner, and though actually thirty-five years of age, he did not look more than twenty-five.

There was only one man who had ever crossed Rarick's path who he had not whipped—and that man was Joe Kidder. There was bad blood

between them, but somehow they had never yet come to blows. Big, silent Joe Kidder somehow impressed Rarick that he would be a dangerous man in a fight. Rarick was not exactly afraid of him, yet he did not seek out an excuse to start a fight. And Joe Kidder was never quarrelsome. The entire country was always looking for them to clash, and eager to make bets one way or another on the outcome, but somehow it had never happened.

The trouble between those two had begun soon after Kidder had bought the old X-L outfit. Rarick had been foreman there for two years previously, and Kidder had continued to employ him until looking over old account books that had been left by Lamb he discovered indisputable evidence that Rarick had been guilty of stealing from the former owner. Kidder had discharged him forthwith.

They had nearly came to blows then, but each man had had a healthy respect for the other's fighting prowess and they had parted with hot words that had left in Rarick's heart a bitter enmity for the man who had fired him.

Rarick had soon after that bought the small ranch up in the brush on Tumbling Creek, five miles above Kidder's place, and gone into the cattle business himself on a small scale. It seemed that he had prospered. The man had a way with him with certain people, especially young fellows with not too much brains and a disposition to be tough.

The three men at the table with him when Comanche Charley arrived were none of them much over twenty years of age. Without exception they were fellows whom Rarick could get to do anything he wanted.

Comanche Charley drew a chair up to the table and extended his hand to Sam Fullmer for cigarette makings.

"Happened tuh be comin' down the river today when I saw Kidder an' old Tony King bargainin' with an emigrant for a dogy calf, so thought I'd just git off an' snoop along in the brush tuh see why they'd gone into business on a scale like that," Comanche explained, as his deft, brown fingers rolled a cigarette.

"Old King would skin a louse tuh get the hide an' taller," began Bill Bunder, a raw-boned, dull looking fellow. "When I was workin' fer him"——

"Go on, Comanche. Finish your story," Rarick ordered smilingly.

"Well," said the breed as he lighted a smoke, "they bought it tuh play a dirty trick on somebody. They held it down an' put a private mark on it, but no brand or ear-mark. We don't want none of our irons on that critter."

"How the hell kin we tell it?" demanded Bunder.

"It ain't like no other cow critter in this country, an' we can happen up that way tomorrow. If it's still alive then the chances are it'll pull through.

All we gotta do then is see that we let it alone," Comanche Charley said with a dry grin.

"Which one of 'em seemed tuh do the buyin'?" Rarick queried softly.

"Why, old Tony made the bargain; Kidder just seemed tuh help him mark it," the breed replied.

"I see. I know old Tony," Rarick said with a sardonic smile. "He'll be watchin' that calf with an eagle eye an' if it ain't branded he's goin' tuh wonder. Hereafter, we lay off of Kidder's calves."

Only Comanche Charley caught his meaning. He alone knew the fierce intensity of Rarick's hatred for Joe Kidder.

II

FORCED TO FIGHT

TWO years and three months after Tony King had bought the dogy calf from the emigrant a fall round-up was in progress. It had been alternately snowing and raining for a week. In the morning the ground was frozen, and the rest of the day it was so slick that a man had always to be on the watch lest he get a bad spill. Even the most sure-footed horse was liable to fall, and that probably meant a broken leg, or worse.

In consequence the gathering of the cattle progressed slowly. The cattlemen were anxious to get the stock into the fields before snow came. They were short tempered and nervous; the punchers sullen and discouraged. It was a time when any little clash was likely to have regrettable consequences.

No man was better aware of the latter fact than Joe Kidder, and no man had need to exercise more patience. For some reason that he could not fathom he had been growing steadily unpopular for the last year. When he approached a group of his neighbors they separated with celerity, or else spoke

to him with frigid politeness. Even Tony King treated him with a brusque coldness, and Joe's efforts to get an explanation got no response other than a cold gleam from the old cattleman's warlike eye.

Kidder's three men knew no more about it than their employer did. They all happened to be old hands who had worked for Joe before he came to the Portneuf range, and they were treated with the same degree of suspicion.

In only one way could Joe account for the hostility. He seemed to be losing no cattle, while the other outfits were. He knew that old Tony was hard hit, but his old friend shortly refused to discuss the matter with him. And during the stress of this stormy, disagreeable round-up was no time to press the matter.

As Joe was coming in with a little bunch of cattle he suddenly noticed the calf old Tony had marked that long ago day. She was now a small sized cow, and there was a big calf by her side. Joe looked her over carefully, as he always had whenever he happened to run across her on the range, and made sure that she was still unmarked and unbranded.

There could be no mistake about it being the same animal, for on a range covered with the big, white-faced Herefords the light red color of the heifer with the darker stripes running from backbone to flank stuck out like a sore thumb. From

the time she had been turned loose on the range Joe had seen her often enough to keep track of her. In the winters he had good naturedly allowed her to run upon his feed grounds after old Tony had stonily refused to assert his ownership.

At first he had wondered why somebody did not slap an iron upon her, and then, as the black stripes became more conspicuous he decided that the rustlers were afraid to take a chance with a critter so marked. He had felt all along that Tony King was foolish not to put his brand upon the calf. But it was Tony's business and he did not bother his head about it.

But now that the calf had become a cow and was trailing a calf of her own the matter was becoming serious. Joe looked the calf over carefully. It was from a Hereford bull, and had the white face of the Hereford instead of the full red of its mother. But just in front of the hips were the same, telltale black stripes that would grow plainer as it grew older. It also was a heifer calf.

Kidder left the little bunch in a draw a short distance from the rodeo and loped on in ahead. Tony King was busy cutting out at the moment and Joe waited until the old cattleman returned to the outside before approaching him.

"Say, Tony," he said, "remember that silver calf o' yours?"

Old Tony nodded grimly.

"Well, she's become a silver cow now an' has brought yuh in a calf," Joe grinned.

Had it been pleasant weather and everything going good it is probable that old Tony would have only grunted and rode away, but now his long nourished, fancied resentment flared into life.

"Damn funny nobody ever socked their brand on that critter, ain't it?" he fairly snarled.

"Why, I don't know. I suppose maybe the critter looked queer," Joe said, surprised by the vehemence of the other's outburst.

"Yeah, yuh damn skunk, the critter did look queer tuh the man who's been rustlin' our stuff here for the last eight years," the old man roared.

With a great effort Joe held his temper under control. "I don't understand yuh, Tony," he said slowly.

"I kin talk plain," the other retorted. "Yuh had me fooled fer a long time, but when nobody put a brand on that calf I knew damn well you was the one whose cattle had been increasin' too damn fast."

The charge was so ridiculous that Joe had to laugh. He did not know about the whispering tongues that had been carrying scurrilous tales to the old man for a long time, and that the maverick calf was the one thing needed to make Tony give them credence. In a roundabout way it had come to Tony's ears that he was being laughed at for having marked a bucket-fed calf to trap cattle

thieves. Believing that only he and Kidder knew about it he naturally blamed Kidder for having told about the half dollar in the calf's front leg. Never liking to be laughed at or made a fool of he had at once begun to hate his neighbor.

Later, when rumors began to spread over the range that Kidder himself might be the thief old Tony was prime to lend a credulous ear. He had stubbornly refused to acknowledge ownership of the animal, and it continued to go unbranded. He, perhaps, had not thought of the possibility of the heifer having calves.

Neither man carried a gun. The work was hard enough at the round-up without being weighed down with a lot of extra equipment. When Kidder laughed old Tony climbed off his horse.

"Git off that horse, yuh damn sneakin' cur, an' I'll jist naturally whale the ground with ye," the old cow man roared.

The smile was wiped from Kidder's face like some one had passed a magic towel over it. But he did not get off his horse.

"I don't know what's got into you, King," he said with a little quiver of excitement in his voice, "but I know that I won't fight with you. For one reason yuh're too old, an' for another we ain't got no real quarrel between us."

"Yuh're a damn thief—an' if yuh take it yo're a coward," King rasped.

"From any man but you, Tony, those would be fighting words, but I won't put my hands on yuh," Joe said steadily.

"Fer a damn good reason," said a man out of the corner of his mouth. "He knows damn well that if he laid a hand on that old man that he'd git strung up in the shake of a calf's tail."

A dozen men had gathered about them by this time. Kidder's own men were the only ones who did not regard him with looks of sullen hate.

"By Gawd, he orta be strung up on general principles anyway," said another. That was Comanche Charley speaking.

At last the goaded Kidder saw an avenue in which to vent his growing anger. There was no one on the range whom he despised as much as he did this talkative breed anyway. He wheeled his horse and brought it alongside the breed's with a single jump. Before Comanche could move Joe had gripped the back of his neck with iron fingers.

"If there's trouble on this range yuh're somewhere near the bottom of it," Joe grated. "You could no more keep out of it than a buzzard can keep away from a carcass."

The pressure of his fingers brought a squawk of involuntary pain from Comanche, but the fellow's right hand slipped into his shirt bosom, and the next moment a keen-bladed bowie knife flashed toward the ranchman.

Joe saw it coming just in time, and thrust the breed away from him with all his strength, and then as he let go the neck he twisted as far in the saddle as he could. Even so the knife ripped into his leather vest and cut a slit a good ten inches long. Joe felt a hot, searing pain along his ribs.

The next moment Kidder moved with lightning rapidity. One hand caught the knifer's wrist and jerked him half out of the saddle. Then the gloved edge of Joe's other hand came down in a stiff rabbit punch across the back of the breed's neck. Comanche Charley plunged toward the ground, and the only reason he did not land on his head was that he was jerked upright by Joe Kidder, even as Joe himself swung to the ground.

Joe twisted the knife from Comanche Charley's hand, and then he began to shake the fellow like a rat. But at the second shake, while the breed's heels were clicking together in the air, there came an interruption.

"That'll be all, Kidder," said a smooth voice. "Comanche Charley is workin' for me, an' I don't stand fer havin' him mal-treated by any big bum twice his size."

Jim Rarick had ridden into the crowd, and his blue eyes were blazing. For years he had wanted to whip Joe Kidder, and the only reasons he had not tried it was a lurking doubt of his ability to do so. Now, however, it was up to him to defend one of his

own men or admit that he was afraid of Kidder. And while the sympathies of the crowd were with him would be a good time for the test between them.

Kidder let go of the breed, and the round-up crowd held its breath. At last the fight they had looked for so long was about to take place. The cattle herd was entirely neglected, and the bunches that had been so laboriously cut out were permitted to mix again without opposition. With the exception of Joe's three men everybody there hoped that Rarick would win.

Rarick had climbed down off his horse and was taking off his coat. Kidder stood staring at him almost stupidly. Joe wanted to get along. He was a man who hated trouble to a degree that was almost fanatical. And now, without his having done anything to deserve it, trouble was hemming him in until there seemed no escape from it. Even in the face of Tony King's recent hot accusation he could hardly understand why these men all seemed to hate him. He had never liked Jim Rarick since he had found out the fellow was a thief and a liar, but he had religiously tried to avoid having trouble with him. Even now he was wondering if there was not some way to avoid a fight.

"Come on, strip yore linen," Rarick sneered, emboldened mightily by the other's hesitation.

"I don't hardly see what this is all about," Kidder began hesitantly.

"He's scared o' ye, Jim. He's yaller tuh his toes," said Bill Bunder.

"Yuh've dodged me fer years, Kidder, but now yuh got tuh fight me or take water like the thievin' snake yuh are," Rarick gritted.

"Tie into him, Joe. You can lick him," encouraged Jack Binney, one of Kidder's own riders.

With a bit of heart sickness Joe realized that if he failed to fight Rarick now that even his own men would think he was yellow. He was by no means certain of his ability to whip Rarick, but it was not fear that deterred him; only his repugnance to trouble.

The two men about to fight were like a bull-dog and a mastiff as they faced each other. Kidder was at least four inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than his antagonist, but he realized that Rarick had advantages that off-set the difference in size. Joe was not slow nor awkward, but neither was he lightning fast and wiry like his opponent. In all his life Joe had had but two fights, and Rarick was always at it. There was no trick of the fighting game, fair or foul, that Rarick was not supposed to know, and Kidder had no advantage except his admitted superiority in strength and reach. Besides that Joe was aware of a warm fluid sweeping down his thigh, and the cut was beginning to make him sick. No blood had soaked through the heavy leather vest he wore, and the crowd had

taken it for granted that Comanche Charley's knife had not reached his flesh. He would not take the vest off so that they could see for fear they would think he was doing it in order to crawl out of the fight. There was no way to avoid the clash now and he resolved to go through with it to the best of his ability.

"All right, Rarick," he said evenly. "You may lick me, but you can't call me a thief an' git away with it."

The next instant Rarick sprang forward and his fist crashed into the big rancher's mouth, driving him backward a dozen feet.

III

"THERE'S A MAN"

THAT first blow had the effect of sending a wild murderous rage searing through Joe Kidder's brain. The big, peaceable fellow was not used to feeling such tremendous passion, and at first its effect was to leave him weak and trembly. As his hand went up involuntarily to his hurt and bleeding lips there came a gloating cheer for Rarick from the spectators.

That cheer, even more than the blow, had the effect of giving Joe a violent impulse to want to lay his hands on his smaller antagonist and rend him to pieces.

Kidder suddenly leaped forward, but Rarick was expecting that, and he ducked under the larger man's arm and drove his fist vengefully into Joe's ribs exactly where the knife had struck. For a moment Joe was deathly sick, but his fury had not abated. He whirled, still trying to grapple with his enemy, but Rarick was in and out, his hard fists beating a tattoo upon Joe's face.

Presently Joe cooled off enough to know that this ranting, plunging attack of his would do him no

good. How that little devil could hit! Joe realized that he must somehow stop those cruelly stinging blows if he was to have a chance. They were blinding him; making his head swim wildly. One eye was already half closed and blood was pouring from his nose and mouth. The worse he was hurt the louder were the cheers from the crowd. They had come to hate Kidder, and to see him being whipped by a smaller man was keen delight.

Joe suddenly ceased to try to clinch with his man and began to use his fists. He was a bit awkward in the use of them compared to Rarick, though against a less skillful man he would have looked to be quite a boxer. But Rarick made him miss by inches, and while he was recovering Rarick would bore in with more smashes to the head and body.

It was the kind of fight the crowd wanted to see. Their favorite, the smaller man, was winning, and it pleased them that Kidder was taking a lot of punishment. Joe sensed their attitude, and it hurt him as much as what Rarick was handing him. He had liked those men; had tried his best to shoot square and get along with them, and now they were savage as wolves in their joy over his hurts.

For a moment, as he gave ground before the relentless attack of the cold-blooded little man, it occurred to him that he was fighting them all, and as he could not whip the crowd he had just as well quit and avert further punishment.

"Don't look so good against a real man as he did when he was chokin' that half breed, does he?" he heard some one say with a hoarse laugh.

"Hope Jim kills him," was the rejoinder from another.

Again Joe's dormant anger leaped to life with elemental fury, and with a sudden, unexpected leap he came breast to breast with his adversary before Rarick could recover and leap back. His arms closed around the other man, and brought jeers from the crowd.

"Lookit him hang on!"

"Aw, stan' up an' fight like a man, an' quit rasslin'," were some of the adjurations hurled at him. He only held on, however, his head over his foe's shoulders, and feeling ineffable relief that those hard, stabbing punches had been stopped for the time being.

Rarick was not in the least perturbed by the change of tactics. He felt that he had Kidder whipped, and he knew that he had even more advantage at wrestling than he had in boxing. If Kidder wanted to play that way he was willing. He felt ashamed of himself for having been afraid of Kidder so long. If he had had any idea he was as unskilled as this he would have whipped him years ago. He suddenly squirmed in Joe's arms and got a crotch hold. The next moment a bewildered look came over Joe's face as he felt himself being

lifted off his feet. Then he struck the ground with stunning force.

The breath was knocked out of him, and for a moment all he could do was lay still and try to defend his face from Rarick's renewed attack. His overthrow had set the savage crowd yelling with approbation. For a minute or two Joe lay still, getting his wind back—and thinking. He had resolved that he would never give up, no matter how much he was hurt. So long as consciousness remained to him he would fight. One thing he had was grit. And gradually the crowd was beginning to understand, and some of them to appreciate it.

Among the latter was old Tony King. "Give up, yuh damn fool," he called. "Yo're licked."

But as Rarick continued to rain blows upon that bloody face, and Kidder made almost no resistance, old Tony made a discordant note in the gloating chorus.

"Joe, for Gawd's sake don't lay there like that," he pleaded. "Yo're whipped. Don't let him beat yuh tuh death."

The old cattleman was howled down by the mob whose appetite for blood was yet unsated. Rarick was keenly enjoying himself; not only on account of the cheering of the crowd, but because of the innate cruelty of his nature. He was not making enough headway to suit him while his opponent was covered up so much, so he decided to show off

a bit of his craftiness, and at the same time render his victim completely helpless.

Shifting his position quickly he thrust one arm under Kidder's, and with the other seized the wrist. His next move was to swing his own whole weight sideways. He would break Kidder's arm or make him yell for mercy. It was a diabolic hold. The only thing wrong with it was that he did not get it quickly enough to keep Kidder from grabbing the fingers of that hand with the other. When he surged backward he brought the arm part way, and into a most painful position; yet not far enough to break it. He dug in his heels to get a fresh leverage, and then suddenly Joe Kidder rolled the other way and exerted every ounce of strength in his body. That strength was tremendous, far greater than Rarick had had any idea, and it chanced to be in a place where weight counted. Before Rarick could loose his hold he was thrown clear over Kidder's body and landed with his face in the dirt.

Like a flash Rarick was wriggling to regain his balance, but the hand that had been used in the effort to break Joe's arm was now caught in an iron grip. By main strength Rarick was jerked to his feet. He tried vainly to yank that left hand loose. He smashed his right fist viciously into Joe's body, but without appreciable result. Then Joe caught the smaller man by the collar and began to shake him like a grown man shaking a child.

At first it seemed to the spectators that this was the most ludicrous and ridiculous thing they had ever seen. They jeered at Kidder for such childish tactics, expecting every second to see Rarick break free and renew his attack upon the man he had practically beaten.

But Rarick did not get loose. The fingers of the hand imprisoned by Kidder were white and bloodless; the whole arm seemed to be growing numb, and he was being shaken till his teeth rattled and his brain grew dizzy. He ceased to hammer against his foe's ribs and devoted all his efforts to trying to break his enemy's relentless grasp.

The terrific shaking continued until Rarick's brain was thoroughly addled. Then Kidder suddenly let go of the man's wrist, and jerked him violently forward by the collar. At the same time his other hand came up and landed against Rarick's face with a sharp crack that snapped the head back a good six inches. Again he jerked the man forward, and again sent that terrific short arm jab to the face. Rarick, completely bewildered and half stunned, could make no more than a few puerile passes to defend himself. Again and again the fellow was yanked forward to receive the blows that each time threatened to break his neck. In two minutes Rarick was sagging helplessly in his antagonist's grasp, and about that time the red rage began to pass from Kidder's brain. Suddenly, in-

stead of driving his fist into Rarick's face, that was now almost as bloated and distorted as his own, he gave the man a violent shove to the ground, where Rarick lay quietly moaning.

The crowd, that had been so vociferous when Rarick was winning, was now deathly still in his defeat. They looked at him with something very nearly akin to awe. He had been whipped if they had ever seen a man in that condition, and yet he had emerged victorious. There was something indomitable about the man. They began to understand why Jim Rarick had not sought a quarrel with him before.

Joe brushed his fingers over his eyes in a vain effort to remove the film that seemed to be forming there. Then he staggered over to his horse, and slowly turned around to face the men who had been clamoring for him to be beaten up. They seemed dancing before him crazily, but he finally managed to single out one man, Tony King.

"Yuh've asked for war, you fellers, an' by Gawd yuh're goin' tuh git it," he ground out; his voice gaining clearness as he spoke. "Yuh're likely to find, King, that the silver dollar yuh paid for that cow was the costliest investment yuh ever made if yuh persist in the attitude yuh been showin' lately."

In his heart he did not mean to threaten, but bitterness had temporarily mastered him.

For a moment old Tony had given grudging admiration to his one time friend because of his gameness, but at that challenge his quick temper flared up.

"Yuh buck me, guy, an' yuh'll find a different proposition from Jim Rarick," he said shrilly. "Young feller, I was stealin' calves before you was born, an' yuh can't put nothin' over on me." In his anger he did not notice how the last part of his statement sounded, if he was even aware that he had said it. Had he and Kidder had their guns there might have been a tragedy then and there. As it was the mob began to hope that old Tony was going to finish what Rarick had failed to do.

King strode angrily forward, but before he reached Kidder the latter fell forward on his face in a dead faint. Jack Binney now thrust himself forward and bent over his employer.

"You dirty . . . stay back," he snapped. "Joe's a better man than the whole bunch o' yuh." He straightened Joe out, lifted his head, and then loosened the leather vest.

"Look here!" he cried, suddenly holding up the palm of his hand crimson with blood. "That damn breed stabbed Joe, an' still he fought Rarick to a stand-still. There's a man!"

His word went undisputed. There was no question but that Kidder was badly hurt, and the men there, though his enemies, had to acknowledge his

gameness. Most of them slunk away to their horses and went to collect the scattered herd, but old Tony King stayed and helped Kidder's men get their boss to the ranch.

Before the old cattleman took his departure he called Binney to one side and said:

"Kidder challenged me to a finish fight about this rustlin' business. When he gits well you tell him that I'm in it up tuh my neck. No man kin make a fool o' me, an' I'm damned sure you fellers are stealin' my calves. Hereafter me an' my outfit carries our shootin' irons, an' if we see anything suspicious we're gonna use 'em. That's all."

"Yuh're crazy, King, if yuh think we're stealin' yore stuff, but if it's trouble yuh want I reckon Joe Kidder can give yuh all yuh want," Binney retorted heatedly.

And thus come to a close the second episode of the silver cow.

IV

A DAY AT SCHOOL

IT WAS long into the winter and the cattle were on the feed grounds when Joe Kidder got on his feet again. As soon as he was able he got on a horse and rode around to look at the cattle in company with Jack Binney.

At one of the larger feed lots he stopped suddenly, and his eyes narrowed.

"What's that critter doin' here?" he asked ominously. His eyes had rested upon the now familiar silver cow. As she nuzzled a forkful of hay a big, lumbering calf galloped up to her side and began to nurse. Joe observed that it was as unmarked as its mother. The black stripes in front of the hips were more pronounced than they had been in the fall.

"Well, er, the critter just drifted in here with her calf, an' I hated tuh turn her out in the lanes tuh starve," Jack explained hesitantly. "Yuh know you've always wintered her anyway."

"Of course," Joe said slowly. He turned his horse, and they rode on. But after a few minutes he turned to Jack and asked:

"Jack, what's goin' tuh happen if this here cow

keeps on breedin', an' her calves go tuh havin' calves, an' nobody has the guts tuh brand 'em?"

"Aw, it couldn't go on that way," Jack protested. "Somebody'll go tuh brandin' the calves anyway."

"Not as long as they have them black stripes, an' if I know cattle they'll keep showin' up for generations," Joe said. "But it's possible that some of 'em might not be plain, an' that's where the trouble may come in. Somebody slaps a brand on one of 'em an' right away Tony King claims they're his property."

"But, gosh, he can't claim 'em forever if he don't do nothin' with 'em, an' not even winter 'em," Jack protested.

"Far as I can see that silver dollar he paid for the calf, an' the half dollar he anchored in its leg gives him title to its posterity down tuh the last generation," Joe said musingly.

Binney was inclined to laugh, but the thing loomed more important to Kidder. Joe had had plenty of time to think while he was recuperating from his wound, and his resentment over the attitude of the men at the round-up had not grown less with the passing of time. He felt that his record of fair dealing should have prevented them from thinking him a thief without some proof, but it seemed not. They had declared war, and it was up to them to make the first move for war or peace.

It was this alone which prevented him from pulling down and killing the cow and calf where they stood. There was to come a time when he wished very much that he had done that very thing, but he reflected now that it might give King an excuse to start trouble.

He had scarcely given a thought to Jim Rarick since the fight, though his men warned him to be on his guard. Indeed, he had far less animosity toward Rarick than the men who had gloated so when Rarick seemed to be beating him. Twice each day during the winter Rarick's boy, whom everyone called "Dutch" though his name was Warren, passed through the Kidder ranch on his way to school. Kidder would have been within his legal rights to make the boy follow the county road, a couple of miles farther, but he was not the kind to stoop to petty tactics. Once, meeting the boy face to face near his own corrals, he smiled pleasantly and greeted the boy with a "Hello, Dutch." The boy gave him a cold stare and passed on without speaking. Joe watched him ride out of sight with a pitying smile.

Dutch Rarick was reckoned the toughest kid in the neighborhood, and perhaps with reason. His mother had left Rarick when the boy was three years old, and he had been reared exclusively by men. Rarick had taught the boy to curse and fight as his first lessons. He had become the terror of all

the school-teachers that were brought to the district.

Joe had feared that the boy might cause more trouble between himself and Rarick. The cowmen of the section took but little interest in schools, but they had elected a school board, and Joe Kidder and Tony King were two of the members. A Mrs. Cleary was the third member. Joe had been elected nearly three years before, and his term would be out in April. In view of the state of public feeling toward him he knew he would not be re-elected. Heretofore, though a single man, he had taken a keen interest in the school. Tony King had taken none, except to try to hire a teacher as cheaply as possible. The result was that Joe and Mrs. Cleary practically ran the school.

When the range trouble began to come up Joe had requested Mrs. Cleary to hire the teacher, and take any other steps that she thought necessary, and that he would approve her actions. He knew she had hired a lady teacher, but he had not visited the school, nor met the teacher. But he had not been on his feet long until he began to hear rumors of trouble, mostly centering around the Rarick boy. Joe hoped sincerely that he would not be called in.

Then one Saturday afternoon, just as he was arising from the table, there was a knock on the door, and when it was opened a very determined looking

young woman stepped into the room. It was a cold day, at least twenty below zero, and she had been riding horseback. Her cheeks were red as June roses, and her dark brown hair had tumbled down about her ears. There were little jewels of frost around her clear, hazel eyes, and despite the somewhat bunglesome wraps she had to wear on account of the cold it was apparent that she was slim and lithe in build. It seemed to Joe that the fiery indignation she obviously brought with her into the room, only served to make about the prettiest picture he had ever seen. He was not used to women, and he was a bit awkward in asking her to come in and be seated.

"Won't yuh set up an' have some dinner?" he invited timidly. "Mrs. Hart'll be glad tuh fix yuh a clean plate." Mrs. Hart was the housekeeper, and her husband one of the regular ranch hands.

"No, thank you," the girl said crisply. "I didn't come to make a social call. I am Vivian Jackson, the school-teacher here, if you are aware that there is such a person."

Joe grinned, but a dull flush stole over his face. Her sarcasm had not escaped him.

"I have heard that we have a school here," he admitted. "Won't yuh set down, Miss Jackson?"

The girl seated herself on the edge of a chair and regarded him with frank hostility.

"I'm glad to know that you are so well informed,"

she shot out. "I had begun to doubt it, though they tell me you are one of the trustees."

"I am guilty o' that," Joe confessed. "The people here got plumb foolish three years ago an' voted me in. I gotta hunch they'll soon vote me out."

"I'm not interested in that," said Miss Jackson curtly. "You are a trustee, and as long as you are in office it's your duty to give the school some consideration."

"Yuh've been havin' some trouble?" Joe asked with a sinking heart.

"Trouble? I haven't been having anything else," Miss Jackson said angrily. "It's that Rarick boy!"

"They tell me Dutch is kind of a tough kid," Joe offered weakly.

"You may call it what you want to, but his insubordination has played havoc with the whole school," she said.

Lute Marsh leaned over and whispered to Jack Binney, "I don't know what them words mean, but if they're as bad as they sound that kid orta be hung."

"I'm dead sorry tuh hear that," Joe said. "Why don't yuh expel him?"

"I have. But his father sent him back. You don't expect me to throw him out by physical force do you?" she demanded.

"Certainly not, Miss. Have yuh talked tuh the other trustees?"

"I have. Mrs. Cleary can do nothing, and Mr. King told me it was my business to handle the scholars." Her face flushed still more as she recalled what had obviously been a stormy interview with the chairman of the school board. And now Joe himself began to get his back up. If Old Tony was taking that stand he would see about it. And he suddenly found himself very much wanting to champion this pretty, ardent girl. That her heart was in her work was evident, and he knew how disagreeable it was possible for Dutch Rarick to make it for her.

At the same time he realized that if he interfered, as was his duty, that it would mean trouble between himself and Jim Rarick—to say nothing of old Tony King. Yet, since he seemed to be in for it anyway, there was no use to consider that.

"Tell me what the kid's been doin'," he requested.

"Everything but what he should do," she said bitterly. "He refuses to do a single thing I order him to do. He goes and comes as he pleases, talks aloud during school hours. Writes obscene words on the walls, and teases the smaller children all the time."

"I should think it was about time the young man was being disciplined," Joe remarked.

"Mrs. Cleary told me that it would do no good to come to you, that you——that you"—— She

broke off suddenly in considerable embarrassment.

"I know, Miss Jackson," he said gently. "My standin' in the community just now is none o' the highest, but I'll be over at the school tomorrow an' see what I can do."

"You were a trustee, and I had to have help from you, or give up my position," the girl confessed. "I—I—can't very well afford to do that. I need the money, and—and I like to teach. I'm fond of children, but this condition has become unendurable, and no one seems to care." Her anger had passed, and now she was perilously close to tears. Joe felt an insane desire to go over and pat her on the shoulder, and tell her not to worry. He did make the remark.

"I—I—wouldn't have come to you if there had been anything else I could do," Miss Jackson faltered.

It was an unflattering remark, but Joe overlooked it. "I'm shore glad yuh did," he said. "I'm goin' tuh take this thing off yore hands."

"I almost wish I hadn't come," she said timidly.

He knew she was thinking of his evil reputation, and regretting that she had been compelled to seek aid from a man who was supposed to be a thief.

"It's all right," he assured her. "Nobody can blame you."

When school took up the next day at noon Joe Kidder sat in a chair close to the teacher's desk.

He had planned his arrival so as to have the entire noon hour with the teacher, and his visit had been pleasant to him if not to Miss Jackson. She went into greater detail about the trouble than she had before, and then she told him about each individual child in her school. There were about twenty of them. Joe listened attentively, but his mind was more centered upon watching the fine play of the girl's features than upon what she said.

When the bell rang and the children filed in Joe noticed that there was a sullen look upon Dutch Rarick's face. The boy glowered at him challengingly as he slumped noisily behind a desk. Joe wondered if the boy meant to have a show-down with him that afternoon, or whether Dutch would be good for the time being, or until he could consult his father. It quickly became apparent that Dutch meant to test him out that afternoon.

Miss Jackson called the school to order, explained that they were honored by the presence of a trustee, and stated that he would talk to them. It was not exactly what Joe had planned, but he got manfully to his feet. He was not an orator, but he had made a few remarks to the scholars during previous winters. As he began to speak Dutch Rarick turned around in his seat and presenting his back to the speaker began to make faces at the children behind him. For a minute or so Joe tried to ignore it, but the eyes of every child were upon the insurgent.

"Excuse me, Mr. Kidder," Miss Jackson said, "May I have a moment please?"

"Warren Rarick, will you please turn around and face the front?"

The boy only humped his shoulders, and continued to face the rear. With a smile Joe bade Miss Jackson remain seated, and he strode down the aisle. His hand fell lightly on the boy's shoulder.

"Yuh'll have tuh behave yourself, Dutch, if you intend to keep on goin' tuh school here," he said mildly. "An' if yuh don't go tuh school here I reckon yuh'll have tuh try the reform school."

"You go tuh hell, yuh cow thief," snarled the boy angrily.

With an effort Joe kept his temper, but he seized the boy by the collar and the seat of the pants and carried him to the door. When he let him go he planted his foot where it would do the most good.

"Now you go home an' stay there," he said sharply. "If I ever hear o' you comin' back here till I say yuh can I'll just naturally lick the hide off yore back. Do yuh git that?"

"We'll git yuh fer this, damn yuh," raged the tearful boy, as he beat a hasty retreat toward his pony. Joe's kick had hurt, and he was keeping out of the way of another one.

Joe declined to finish his talk when he went back inside the schoolhouse, and soon after that he took

his departure. Miss Jackson accompanied him to the door.

"I'll be droppin' around occasionally," he said, "an' if Dutch or his dad cause yuh any trouble you just let me know."

"Oh, I hope this won't cause you any trouble with your neighbors," Miss Jackson said. "Somehow, you're not the kind of man I expected to find when I went to see you."

"Don't you worry yourself about me, Miss," he said. "I reckon I'll have trouble enough with my neighbors anyway. Though I will say that I've tried to live peaceful with 'em ever since I've been here."

"I believe you, Mr. Kidder," the girl said impulsively, suddenly extending her hand.

Joe went away with his head in a whirl. In the modest little frock which the girl wore in the schoolroom she had looked even more enticing and appealing than she had in his own house. In his busy life he had not thought much about women, but now he found this girl crowding all other thoughts out of his mind.

At the same time he was aware that his action in throwing Dutch out of the school would probably precipitate another collision with Rarick. He was honest enough to admit that he did not want another fist fight with Jim Rarick. He felt that his victory had been due to a fluke, and he did

not try to deny that he had been thoroughly beaten before Rarick's eagerness had given him a chance. He had no wish to face those smashing fists again. But neither did he mean to avoid the clash if Rarick tried to start anything. And he rather believed that Rarick wanted to re-open the argument.

If trouble came again, however, he felt that it would not be settled with fists. Since his recovery he had gone to carrying the Colt's .45 which had hung on the wall practically all the time since he had bought the ranch. He had noticed too that his riders had unobtrusively gone to wearing theirs. He hoped that if there was to be a row that it would come quickly, and that his men would not become involved.

The first part of his wish at least was to be realized. The next afternoon he had a caller, and that caller was Tony King.

"Kidder," said the old cowman without ceremony, "the school board o' this deestrict ain't big enough tuh hold both you an' me, an' I'm doubtful if the country is. Which of us d'ye reckon is gonna git out?"

"If either of us does it will be you," Joe replied steadily.

V

AN UNSUSPECTED ENCOUNTER

TONY KING'S hand rested on the handle of his gun, as a warning to Kidder that he was ready for trouble. Joe was careful to make no similar gesture. Just as long as it was possible he meant to avoid trouble with King, without, however, allowing the old man to bully and browbeat him.

"So you've taken up the fight for Jim Rarick an' his tough kid, have you?" Joe asked.

"No. Rarick kin fight his own battles," King roared. "But I am a trustee, an' I say that a thief like you ain't got no business tryin' tuh oversee the morals o' young kids."

Joe was amused at this sudden access of virtue upon the part of King; at the same time that his anger rose for the crime that had been laid against him.

"King," he said, "it's no light thing to call a man a thief. I'm callin' on yuh right now tuh prove that statement or else admit that yuh lied."

Old Tony's jaws clamped together stubbornly. "I don't have tuh do either one," he declared. "I will git the proof some day, an' when I do"——

"I should riddle yore carcass with bullets right now, you damned old fool," Joe said. "But I won't. I'll give you a chance to git off my ranch. An' if yuh send that Rarick kid back tuh school I'll throw him out faster than you can lead him in. Now git tuh hell away from here."

King half drew his gun from the holster, but Kidder's eyes did not waver, and he did not move his folded arms. With a sudden oath the old cattleman whirled his horse around and galloped away.

Many times Joe had racked his brain for some reason for the suspicion that had fallen upon him, and he could find no other reason than the animal that had come to be called "the Silver Cow." When no one had branded the thing old Tony had jumped to the conclusion that Kidder had told people about the mark, and that was a gross breach of confidence. With old Tony's temper Joe could understand how it would make him wild-eyed with wrath. But if that had been all Joe felt that Tony would have bounced him at once about the matter. That meant that Tony must have believed from the first that Joe was the calf thief, and was waiting to get the goods on him. Yet it was hard to understand Tony thinking that without more reason.

Now Joe reflected that it was a bit peculiar that the calf thieves had not branded this apparent maverick. He had not told of the mark; old Tony would not. Yet Joe was beginning to think that

somebody on the range must have known about it all along. He could not understand how it had been found out, but if it had been the actual thieves he could see where they might profit by laying their own crimes on to him. In fact they seemed to be doing just that, whether they had known about the calf or not. Perhaps old Tony was not so much to blame as he had thought. What he had to do was find out who those third parties were.

There was nothing he could do in that regard until spring. It was a pity, he thought, that this school trouble had to come up just when it did to further complicate matters. And yet when he reflected that it had caused him to know Vivian Jackson he was rather glad.

The one man he had most suspected of being crooked was Comanche Charley. The breed had no regular occupation. He picked up jobs where he could get them, and between times he stayed with the reservation Indians, though he did not even speak their language. Joe wondered if the fellow did not steal cattle and dispose of them to his Indian friends. It seemed plausible enough, but it did not account for the branded calves. Whoever did that he was sure must have cattle of their own running on the range. The big, unbranded calves would be separated from their mothers and the thief's own brand placed upon it.

Joe had often thought of Jim Rarick in this re-

gard, mostly because he had evidence that the man had once been a thief. But if it was Rarick he worked cautiously for his little band of cattle had increased no faster than nature would account for.

And now another idea suddenly popped into Joe's brain. Was not old Tony King himself the thief? He knew there were rumors that the old man had been rather free with a running iron in his younger days. Had not the old devil bought that calf and marked it with deliberate intent to start a quarrel with Joe and then blame him for his own misdeeds? He wondered why he had not thought of it before, and decided that it was because he had always liked King so well.

His anger against King came with a rush, and almost caused him to forget that he had no proof. But he resolved that henceforth he would make no concessions to King whatever. Now King had thrust himself into the school business for no reason at all, and Joe rather hoped that the old man would get obstreperous.

About four o'clock that afternoon Joe mounted his horse and set out for Bill Cleary's place, with a triple object in view. Cleary was the constable, and Joe wanted to see him about the Silver Cow that had become a steady boarder at his ranch. He meant to force Tony King to a show-down on that matter at least. Mrs. Cleary was, of course, the the school business. And finally, he knew that

Vivian Jackson boarded with the Clearys and he looked forward with a lot of interest to seeing her.

It happened that Mrs. Cleary was the one he saw first. Her husband was out feeding, and Miss Jackson had not yet returned from school.

"I'm awful glad yuh threw that Rarick boy out of school," Mrs. Cleary said, almost cordially. "You've no idea what a sweet girl Vivian Jackson is. It would have broken her heart to have failed with this school. It's her first one."

"I know she is," Joe agreed absently, and Mrs. Cleary gave him a startled look. "I—I—mean it would be tough for her," he went on hurriedly. "Tony King was at my place this mornin' an' I thought he talked like he kinda wanted tuh make her take Dutch back in. Thought I'd better see how you felt about it."

"I feel like keeping him out. I hated to have to let Vivian appeal to you, but she insisted after King refused to do anything," the woman said.

"I'm glad she did," Joe said, though he was aware that Mrs. Cleary did not in the least approve of him.

"We were thinking," the woman said, looking at the floor, and with a slight flush, "that you might be going to resign. In that case Mr. Cleary might be appointed to"——

"I have no intention of resignin'," Joe said shortly.

Thereafter there was a decided coolness in the room until Cleary himself stamped in. The man had once been one of Joe's best friends, but now he treated him with a cool disdain. Joe felt about as welcome as a hound dog in a cat congregation.

"Cleary," Joe said, after the man had spoken briefly, and was preparing to go on out and do his chores without passing even the customary salutations of the range, "I've got a couple of unbranded strays over to my place, a cow and a calf. I want you to advertise 'em for sale. I want my feed bill. An' whoever buys 'em in can put a brand on 'em."

"Yuh mean that critter they're callin' King's silver cow?" Cleary asked.

"That's the one," Joe said grimly.

"All right, I'll see about it," Cleary promised.

But when nothing came of it after some weeks and Joe broached the constable in the matter Cleary curtly informed him that he had seen Tony King and the latter had claimed the animals belonged to him. "If Kidder wants his feed bill let him ask me for it," he reported King to have said. And that led Joe to take certain definite action to collect his bill.

Meantime the constable stalked out to do his chores and Joe was left to have an uncomfortable half hour until Vivian Jackson arrived.

It was deep dusk when Joe, looking out of the

window, saw the girl arrive. Only the fact that Mrs. Cleary had not chosen to light the lamps made it possible. The schoolhouse was a mile from the Cleary place, so the girl rode a horse to and from school. Joe observed at once that she had not returned alone.

There was a man with the girl, and though Joe could not tell who it was he could make out the exaggerated gallantry with which the fellow leaped off his horse and hastened to help the girl dismount and take the reins away from her to tie them over the saddle horn so that the animal could trot over to the barn and be tended by Cleary. They passed out of Joe's range of vision, and he felt a sudden, sharp stab of jealousy—the first he had ever known.

A moment later the door was opened and Miss Jackson stepped inside. "No lights, Mother Cleary?" the girl asked laughingly. "Come right in, Mr. Rarick. I hope you don't fall over the furniture."

She had not seen Joe Kidder standing in the shadows, and he was glad of it. He felt, somehow that there was a certain amount of chagrin depicted upon his face. He was certainly a bit confused to see her in the company of Jim Rarick, with the fellow obviously playing gallant to her. And she seemed perfectly cheerful, too, instead of acting as she might be expected to with the father of the boy who had caused her so much grief.

"I've been talkin' with Joe Kidder here, an' just neglected tuh light the lamp," Mrs. Cleary explained, and for the first time the two who had just entered discovered Joe standing there by the window.

"Oh-h, excuse me, Mr. Kidder—I failed to recognize you," the girl apologized nervously.

"That's all right, Miss Jackson," Joe said easily, as he got a grip on himself. His eyes were upon Jim Rarick. It was the first time they had met since their fight at the round-up, and Joe wondered if Rarick would create a scene. He was sorry that they had met in the home of a third person, and especially in the presence of Vivian Jackson, but he was determined that if there was trouble that Rarick would be solely responsible.

"Hello, Rarick," he said with a tone that was studiously matter of fact, just as though he were addressing a casual acquaintance.

"Hello, Kidder," Rarick returned in the same kind of voice. He turned at once to Mrs. Cleary. "Miss Jackson was kind enough tuh let me see her home," he said suavely. "Do yuh know, from the stories that boy o' mine told me I expected to find a reg'lar old Tartar of an old maid when I went to the schoolhouse today. If I'd known what she was I'd have been down there long ago. You can expect to have me for a regular caller, Mrs. Cleary."

Right then it was hard for Joe to keep his hands

off the fellow. This cool effrontery in openly declaring himself a suitor for the girl at their first meeting, and in the presence of others seemed like an insult to Joe. He wondered if Rarick had not said it merely to goad him.

"Well, Jim Rarick, it's about time yuh took some notice o' that boy o' yourn," retorted Mrs. Cleary heatedly. "All the trouble he's caused!"

"I'm dead sorry," Rarick laughed. "I went down tuh the school today tuh just raise Cain about Dutch gittin expelled, but when I found out how it was I promised Miss Jackson that if she'd let him come back to school again I'd see that he behaved or I'd skin him alive."

"An' are yuh goin' tuh let him come back, Vivian?" Mrs. Cleary asked.

"Why, of course. I want to give Warren all the show I can," the girl said. "He's naturally bright. All I ask is that he behave himself."

"It happened that I was one who expelled him," Joe spoke up. "I figger it's a case for the trustees and not for the teacher."

"You mean you won't let him come back—even if I want him to?" the teacher demanded a bit hotly.

"I'm not sayin' that," Joe denied. "Personally, I'm willin' tuh have him come back tuh school if he behaves himself, but I want it understood that it's on probation. The kid's old enough tuh know

what he's doin'. If he wants to come back he'll have tuh make a public apology to the teacher, an' I aim tuh be there tuh see that he does it."

"I take it, Kidder, that yuh're usin' the kid tuh try tuh hand me a package," Rarick said.

"No. I'm simply doin' my duty as a trustee. I intend for the other kids tuh know that Miss Jackson wasn't bluffed."

"I reckon Miss Jackson is able tuh run her own school," Mrs. Cleary spoke up. "If she says the boy can come back that settles it. An' me an' Mr. King are trustees as much as you are."

Joe smiled grimly. He had expected this. They would vote him down, but he meant to make them show their hand.

"I think Mr. Kidder is right," Miss Jackson said unexpectedly. "If Warren has to apologize he won't be so ready to repeat his offenses."

"All right, Miss, he'll apologize," Rarick promised. "Not because a trustee ordered him to, but because you request it of him," he added pointedly.

"I'll be there to see that he does it," Joe repeated, as he started toward the door.

"An' I'll be there tuh see that yuh don't try tuh repeat that performance o' kickin' the kid again," Rarick snapped.

"Good night, Mr. Kidder," said Miss Jackson.

"Good night, Miss," Joe said curtly as he passed through the door.

He was sore at himself, sore at Rarick and his son, sore at the Clearys, and sore at Vivian Jackson. The ease with which the girl had been won over by Jim Rarick grated upon him worst of all. Rarick was a divorced man, and now obviously the fellow meant to hang around the pretty school-teacher.

"Why the hell don't I have sense enough tuh resign like they all want me to, an' just tend to my own business till I git the goods on these rustlers who've stolen my good name?" he grumbled to himself.

Such a course would save him a lot of trouble that he was surely heading into as it was, and it would make his vindication that much more complete if it ever occurred. But he knew that he would not do it. He had started to see the thing through, and he would do it if it killed him.

VI

AN UNPAID WINTER BILL

THE day of Dutch Rarick's re-instatement in school must have seemed like a school celebration to the children in view of the number of adults who were present to witness the event. Jim Rarick was there with the star actor in the play; so was Tony King, the Clearys, and half a dozen other neighbors who had heard that something dramatic impended. Joe Kidder was the last to arrive. He came in just after the children filed into their seats.

The teacher gave Joe a brisk "good morning," but he felt that it lacked warmth. Undoubtedly the Cleary family had been poisoning her mind against him.

The teacher stood behind her desk and made a little speech, explaining that Warren Rarick had broken the rules of the school, and that he wished to offer an apology.

The youth got to his feet and grinned. There was nothing penitent in his attitude. "Sorry I broke thuh rules, an' I 'poligize tuh Miss Jackson.

Wanta git took back. But I don't 'poligize tuh the lousy cuss that kicked me outa here," he said, and sat down.

Every eye shifted to Joe Kidder, and to their surprise Joe grinned widely. "Spoken like a man, Dutch," he said. "I don't expect yuh to apologize to me, but if I ever hear of you actin' up again I'll come down here an' kick the daylights outa yuh."

The boy was plainly discomfitted, and looked at his father inquiringly. Miss Jackson was smiling, a bit mischievously, and Rarick knew better than create a scene in the school. It was old Tony King, as usual, who precipitated trouble.

"That's enough o' this business here," said King. "It's all a lot o' fuss over nothin'. If a teacher ain't fit tuh han'le her scholars she ain't fit tuh teach. I ain't got no use fer a trustee who thinks he has tuh butt in an' help run the kids. I call on Joe Kidder tuh resign before we holds an election an' throws him out."

Mrs. Cleary began shrilly denouncing both of her fellow trustees, and the whole room was in an uproar. Joe Kidder and Miss Jackson tried vainly to restore order.

"You children are dismissed," cried the teacher. She was perilously close to tears as the children scattered all over the room but did not go out.

Completely disgusted, and wishing to avert further disturbance Joe started toward the door. But

old Tony followed him savagely. "Gonna resign or not?" the old man roared.

"Not," Joe snapped. "King, yuh're an old fool. Don't you know this is no place"——

"Spat!" The old man's horny fist crashed against the younger man's jaw.

Joe reeled out through the door, with King following him. The old cattleman had gone berserk, and Joe saw that a fight could not be avoided. As King swung again Joe blocked the blow, and then clamped his left arm over old Tony's head and pressed it hard against his ribs.

Try as he would King could not break the hold. He knew that he was in a most undignified position, and his head was beginning to swim from the relentless pressure.

"I won't hit an old man like you, King, but I'll squeeze yuh like a lemon till yuh promise tuh be good," Joe told him.

Joe really expected Rarick to take a hand in the fuss, but Rarick proved to be the one to keep others from interfering.

"Let 'em fight," he advised with a sardonic smile.

It did not prove to be much of a fight, however. Old Tony was simply powerless in the grasp of his stronger opponent. He sputtered and fumed, but could not get his head out of the vise that was making his head swim.

"When yuh say yuh'll be good I'll let yuh go,"

Joe said, and after a minute or so old Tony snorted explosively,

"All ri'—I'll be goo'."

But when Joe released him the old cattleman grabbed for his gun. Like a flash Joe was upon him again, pinning his arms to his sides.

"You old fool," Joe raged. "I'd orta kill you just on general principles, an' if yuh don't let that gun alone I will."

After a little more scuffling King agreed to let his gun alone and go home. But this time it was Jim Rarick again who persuaded him.

"But I'll drive yuh out o' this country, Kidder, or I'll have yore scalp," he threatened hoarsely as he strode away.

With the state of feeling such as it was Joe decided that he had better follow his enemy's example. The last thing he saw as he left the schoolhouse was Jim Rarick talking to the school-teacher.

"Damn the fellow," he muttered. "If he thinks he's goin' tuh hang around that Jackson girl all the time he's mistaken."

During the next week or so he had occasion to know that Rarick was hanging around the schoolhouse a great deal, for at least every other day Rarick rode through Joe's yard on his way to the schoolhouse. Joe remembered that prior to their meeting at the Cleary's Rarick had always traveled around the public road, though his boy had come

through the field. But now Rarick himself seemed to feel that it was safe to come through. Indeed, when the two almost met one day when Joe was coming from the stables Rarick nodded, and called casually, "Hello, Kidder."

Before Joe could recover from his surprise Rarick had passed on, but Joe was aware that he had answered the salutation with a curt, "Hello, Rarick," before he really meant to.

He wondered considerably about it. Was Rarick willing to let the old feud drop, or was the fellow only planning more devilment? It was Joe's nature to trust people and think the best of them, and his recent ostracism made him want to welcome the friendship of even Rarick. Had it not been for one thing he undoubtedly would have greeted Rarick with at least some degree of cordiality the next time they met. That thing was the resentment he felt on account of Rarick's visit to Miss Jackson.

A few days later Joe took occasion to ride over to the school for the ostensible purpose of inquiring how Dutch Rarick was behaving. The school-mistress greeted him with a cordial handshake, and therefore it became impossible for Joe to tear himself away until long after school, when the girl told him frankly that he would have to go home, or else accompany her to the Cleary's.

"I'll go," he grinned. "But I'm goin' tuh come back plum frequent—if I may."

"You're still a trustee—you have a right to come any time you wish," she told him.

"If I wasn't a trustee would I still be welcome?"

The girl's eyes rested upon him appraisingly. "I believe you would," she said presently. "Even though people do say some hard things about you."

"That makes me a heap happy," he told her. "If it was just because I was trustee yuh wouldn't see me again. I know they'll be votin' me out purty quick anyway, an' if yuh don't need my help with Dutch Rarick there'd be no excuse for me to come."

"But if you're not interested in the school, why do you want to come?" she asked mischievously.

"Because I can't help myself, Vivian," he said. "I've never had no time for wimmin, but I never met one like you before."

The girl got to her feet with a nervous laugh. "I'm going home now, before you get sentimental, Mr. Kidder. I'm afraid you'll be living up to your name."

"That name's the bunk. But I never was more serious than I am right now. If it wasn't for what people are sayin' about me, I'd"——

"Those things are not true, are they?" she asked in a tone that denied that they were.

"At least not all they said," he assured her. "I never stole, an' I never deliberately picked a row in my life. I just seem to have been caught in some sort of a trap by my own blindness."

"I believe you," she said earnestly.

He sought her hand. "That makes me feel a heap better even though I can't see no end of the trouble that's in sight," he said. "Vivian if I ever do clear up my name, an' git this trouble cleared up I'm goin' tuh ask you a question if I may."

The girl met his gaze steadily. "I think I'd like to hear it," she said, though her cheeks flamed red.

Joe had not been in such high spirits for months as he was as he rode home that night. Vivian had made no promises, yet she had clearly implied that she thought well of him. He resolved that he would not attempt to make love to her until he had cleared up the scandal that hovered over him, but it was not a week until the devils of jealousy were pricking him; for despite the fact that Dutch Rarick seemed to be properly subdued the boy's father continued to make regular visits to the school-teacher both at the school and at her boarding place. Joe's own visits of necessity had to be fewer and more curtailed in time.

Meantime rumors came to him by way of his cowboys and the country store where they were in the habit of spending their evenings that old Tony King was out to get him. Somehow, Joe could not take these threats seriously since he had come to believe that old Tony himself was the cattle thief who was causing most of the trouble. Just as soon as spring came and the cattle went on

the range Joe meant to get to the bottom of the stealing.

One day he again noticed the silver cow and her calf, and it brought a frown to his face. Apparently Cleary had done nothing about the matter, and it angered Joe to think that this creature which had started all the trouble was still on his hands. For King to make him feed it and its off-spring was nothing less than an insult. Of a sudden he took down his rope and hung it on the cow. He threw her down, and tied on hard and fast so that his horse could hold her after he dismounted. There was a grim smile on his face when he finally let the animal go.

VII

AN INTERRUPTED ELECTION

IT WAS like getting out of prison again for Joe Kidder to get out on the range when the snow went off in the spring. The long, hard winter had been enough to try his nerves, aside from the trouble he had had, and the suspense of always fearing a clash with either Tony King of Jim Rarick.

It so happened that early in the spring all the cattle in that valley were turned out together to graze on Warm Spring Mountain, where the snow went off a full three weeks earlier than in the surrounding country. The mountain happened to be on the Indian reservation, but was not accessible to the Indians until the snow went off on the high divides, a month later. By that time the white men would get their cattle off and located for the summer.

It happened that Kidder was the first to turn out, and two days later Lute Marsh came dashing to the ranch with word that two Indian police had unexpectedly arrived and made a claim for range fees.

"Just let 'em sweat until these other fellows git their stuff out," Joe ordered.

A week later, after King and the others had turned out, the two policemen encountered Joe on the range.

"Huh! You pay um two dolla each cow," ordered the senior policeman.

"What?" Joe thundered. "Why that's an outrage. We've used this range for years without trouble."

"Two dolla—or you go agency," the Indian said calmly.

Joe was non-plussed. It was robbery, and he wondered if the Indians were not merely trying to graft a bit. He thought about trying to bribe them, but quickly decided against it. "I'll go tuh the agency with yuh all right, before I pay that," he said. "Have you been after King?"

"King he no have to pay," the Indian grinned. "He good frien' Comanche Charley."

"Comanche Charley? What the hell has he got tuh do with it?" Joe demanded.

"He lease—um this range," he was informed cheerfully.

Joe felt the bottom dropping out of things. At last it seemed that his enemies had him cornered. Comanche Charley had done what no white man had been able to do—lease a portion of the reservation. Not for a moment did Joe suppose that the breed had done it on his own hook. White men had put up the money for him, or at least one white man—Tony King.

If the lease held good Joe knew that he would have to pay the price his enemies demanded. His hay was practically gone, and he could not make his stock eat it after having had a taste of green grass, even though he were able to cut them out and get them back. But he could not conduct a round-up at that time of the year anyway.

"Where is Comanche Charley?" he demanded.

"Me no know," said the Indian. "Me know yuh pay um two dolla damage, or go agency."

"You go to hell," Joe snapped. As he started to turn his horse the older Indian reached out to seize his bridle reins, and the other, a gaily dressed young buck of twenty-five drew his gun.

Joe had no mind to be arrested. A trip to the agency would take a week, and that might be time enough for his enemies to effect his ruin. Furthermore, it angered him to have the Indian take liberties with his horse. He turned his horse swiftly the other way, and as the well trained beast crashed against the Indian's horse Joe's fist shot out and landed on the Indian's jaw, knocking him from the saddle.

An instant later the younger Indian's gun cracked, but the bullet went wide of the mark. Before he could pull trigger again Joe's gun was out and covering him.

"Pass it over, Injun," Joe ordered. "I don't wanta hurt yuh any, but I ain't got no time tuh

be bothered. An' my cattle stay right here on this mountain."

He collected both Indians' guns, emptied them and hung them on a nearby bush. Then he galloped away in search of Comanche Charley. As was to be expected the breed could not be found. Joe was determined that he would not be arrested by the Indian police, and equally determined that his cattle should stay where they were. If he went broke in subsequent litigation he could stand it, but he would not weaken until he had to.

Failing to find the breed on the range Joe suddenly determined to do a rash and dangerous thing. Half an hour before sunset he drew his horse to a halt before the tent which temporarily sheltered Tony King's men. There were half a dozen men at the camp, including old Tony himself. At Joe's approach the old cattleman stalked out a few feet with his hand on his gun.

"Is Comanche Charley here?" Joe asked without ceremony.

"He is not," was the grim rejoinder. "What else do yuh want?"

"I want tuh know what kind of a dirty deal yuh've been pullin' off with that breed to rob me?" Joe shot out.

Tony King regarded him with a malevolent stare. He had come to hate Joe Kidder with a bitter, unreasoning hatred since his discomfiture at the

schoolhouse. The trail of hatred led back to the silver cow and the machinations of Jim Rarick, but King knew that no more than Kidder did.

"I'm tired o' losin' cattle, Kidder, an' I'm gonna run yuh outa the business," he said. "Comanche Charley leased this range, an' sub-leased it tuh the rest of us. Yore cattle have got no right here, an' by Gawd yuh gotta git 'em off."

"I'll see you in hell first, King," Joe rasped. "Show me yore papers if yuh got any right here."

"The Injun police'll show yuh what rights you got," King sneered.

"If the Injun police or anybody else tries tuh move my cattle they'll wish they hadn't," Joe flamed. "But I want tuh find that breed." He wheeled his horse and dashed away before more high words might lead to trouble. If he could lay hands on Comanche Charley he felt that he might fix things up. He realized that they had got him in a sack, but he was willing to make concessions to the breed unless the fellow got too overbearing. He thought he would probably find Comanche Charley at Rarick's place, but it was too late to go there that night.

Instead of going to camp he rode back to the ranch, though it was nearly midnight when he got home. The more he thought about the matter the more convinced he became that there was something wrong with the so-called lease. He did not

believe they could make it stick in a court of law. Comanche Charley had no cattle. It would be self-evident that he had leased it for white men, and if it could not be attacked on that ground then Joe believed no court would permit the unjust discrimination he was showing.

He decided that the best thing he could do was to go down to the Indian agency and find out about things, and if he could do nothing there to see a lawyer. Since the road over the divide was not open he would have to ride twenty miles to the railroad and then go by train a roundabout way of a hundred miles. It would take him three days.

Then he remembered that the next day was the annual school election. He knew they would elect somebody else to succeed him, but he wanted to be there to show them that he was not a quitter. Especially did he want Vivian Jackson to know that he was not afraid to face his foes.

He could not catch his train until five o'clock in the afternoon, and this would let him stay at the schoolhouse until two; long enough in all probability. He arrived there shortly after nine, but to his surprise and disappointment Jim Rarick was there ahead of him and had Vivian cornered. Since the one time when Vivian had given Joe some encouragement they had never ventured to speak seriously about sentiment. But Joe had uneasily observed that the girl was constantly growing more

intimate with Rarick. She had also told him that Dutch Rarick had changed entirely and was doing wonderful work in school. In fact the boy seemed as fond of his teacher as his father was, and Vivian was openly proud.

The Clearys and half a dozen other people were also present. Joe observed at once that there were two names written upon the blackboard to succeed him. The rules of nomination were simple. Whoever had a candidate simply went up to the blackboard and wrote down the name. One name was Jim Rarick; the other Israel Hubbell, the latter perhaps the most worthless and disreputable person in the community. His nomination was a joke.

Joe was determined to vote, and he could not vote for either of these two. That Rarick would be elected went without question, but Joe could not let the fellow get in without some sort of protest. Every eye was on him as went up to the blackboard and picked up a piece of chalk.

"Gonna write yore own name, Kidder?" demanded some one cynically.

"Thinkin' some of it, but I really ain't got the time tuh serve," Joe returned coolly. He looked over the crowd, and the corners of his mouth twisted into a trace of a grin. He recalled Mrs. Cleary's suggestion that if he resigned Cleary might be appointed in his place. Apparently the Clearys had been convinced that it would not do to have two

trustees from the same family, and they had been won over by Rarick. Nevertheless, Joe boldly wrote the name of John Cleary on the blackboard. He guessed that Cleary still entertained a sneaking wish to dominate the schoolboard, and that he would not cause his name to be erased. Knowing Mrs. Cleary as he did he could picture her spending the remainder of the day conducting a semisecret campaign for her husband. Her disappointed look he guessed was because she had already cast her vote for Rarick.

Joe turned and walked straight over to where Vivian and Jim Rarick were sitting. Rarick's eyes narrowed as he saw his rival approaching. The girl's smile was a bit nervous.

"Well, Kidder, you don't seem tuh like me as a candidate," Rarick said.

"The only reason I put Cleary's name up there was because I couldn't bring myself tuh vote for Hubbell," Joe retorted.

"Now don't you boys go to quarreling about an election," Vivian said hastily. "For heaven's sake let this be one meeting at the schoolhouse where there won't be a fight."

"I'm sure I don't want a fight, Miss Jackson," Joe said. "But yuh can't blame me for bein' interested in my successor."

"Yuh've observed then that yuh'll have a successor," Rarick sneered.

"Yes, but I'm not admittin' yet that there'll be any improvement," Joe said. "You might be elected."

"Sour grapes," Rarick laughed.

"We'll drop that," Joe said shortly. "There's a question I want to ask you though. Is Comanche Charley and those two Indian policemen stopping at yore place?"

"I'd answer that if they were it was none of yore business," Rarick said.

"It looks to me, Rarick, like you an' me might have tuh settle our differences again with our fists," Joe said evenly. "But if you insist on that you should be willing to go away by ourselves an' settle it right. If yuh want we'll leave our guns here at the schoolhouse an' take a ride together over the hill."

"Gentlemen!" Vivian protested.

"You can't bluff me, Kidder," Rarick said quietly, and unbuckled his gun belt.

The whole conversation had been carried on quietly, and though the crowd had watched them curiously their talk had not been overheard.

"You buckle that belt," Miss Jackson ordered sharply. "I'm disgusted with you two, but if you will insist upon fighting walk out quietly and get on your horses. I'll go with you and take charge of the guns."

Rarick buckled his belt again and started for the

door. The other two followed him, and soon all three were in the saddle; Rarick gallantly untying the girl's horse and holding her stirrup. Joe was a bit pale, but he felt eagerness rather than fear as they rode away.

There was a low, tree covered ridge not far from the schoolhouse, and they instinctively headed for it. They angled down over the side into a little draw. Presently they reached a smooth, open space and Rarick stopped.

"This is as good a place as any," he declared.

"Give me your guns," Vivian ordered.

Both men unbuckled their weapons and passed them over. The girl hung them on her saddle horn. "Wait!" she commanded tersely, when they started to dismount.

They stopped and stared at her.

"Isn't this a childish thing you two are contemplating," she said coldly. "Grown men, and fighting like two little kids. You can go ahead if you want to, but I'll tell you this: If you do fight I'll never speak to either one of you again."

"That's a good chance for you tuh crawl out of a lickin', Kidder," Rarick sneered.

Joe swung down and pulled off his coat. "I'm sorry, Miss Jackson," he said, "but I feel like this thing had been forced on me, an' there's no honorable way tuh git out of it."

Rarick leaped down and slipped out of his coat

fast and gracefully. A gray pallor crept over the girl's face. Evidently she had expected to keep them from fighting, and then lecture them for their quarrelsomeness. Now that she saw they were going to fight anyway she was plainly disconcerted and frightened.

They came together without ceremony, and as was to be expected Rarick landed the first blow, a terrific smash to the jaw that sent Joe reeling a dozen feet. A gasp escaped the girl's lips.

Joe recovered himself before Rarick could do more than land a few stiff jolts on his arms and the top of his head. He had planned this battle well. He had learned in the previous fight not to try to rush Rarick and beat him down. He must wait, defending himself as best he could, till he saw an opening, or until the smaller man tired.

But Rarick had also learned from their previous encounter, and he was determined not to let Kidder get a hold upon him. His game was to box carefully, and gradually cut his man to pieces. When Kidder was weak enough he would resort to wrestling tactics, get the big fellow down and worry him into abject submission. What he wanted was to punish and humiliate Kidder to the utmost extent. He did not try to bewilder his man by a flurry of blows, but took his time and made every lick count.

Twice Rarick shot hard blows to the face, and

each time the flesh turned purple under the impact. Then Joe slipped in dodging a blow, and Rarick shot in three punches in rapid succession to the nose and mouth. Joe's face gushed blood. It hindered his breathing, and when he drew his breath it sounded like a sob.

The white-faced, terror-sticken girl had sat her saddle like one petrified until this time, but suddenly she came to life. She had never imagined that anything could be so brutal as this. Suddenly putting spurs to her pony she turned and galloped wildly back to the schoolhouse.

"Go quick!" she cried when she arrived there. "Kidder and Rarick are fighting—and Rarick is killing Joe."

VIII

A DECISION OF IMPORTANCE

NEITHER of the combatants had noticed the girl's departure, for both were intent upon watching the opponent. Joe was not greatly discouraged that he was getting the worst of it. He knew that he was doing better than he had in their first fight; blocking many of his foe's blows and occasionally hooking his own fist to head or body. He was absorbing tremendous punishment, but he told himself he was game enough to take it until the breaks came his way.

Unfortunately for him Rarick got the first break. Both men wore their high-heeled cowboy boots, and they were not conducive to swift foot work. Once when Rarick made a short rush Joe stepped swiftly backward, and the heel of his right boot dropped into a gopher hole. His ankle was twisted badly, and when he tried to recover himself the boot stuck, and he fell backward.

In a flash Rarick was upon him, a vicious snarl of triumph on his face. Joe's shoulders had fallen across a six inch rise, and the back of his head flew far down against the ground. Instantly Rarick shot

the heel of his hand against Joe's chin and pressed upward with all his strength. At the same time Rarick cleverly got one leg over one of Joe's arms, and seized the other with his own free hand.

With his head forced into this unnatural position the blood ran down into Joe's throat, strangling him. The horrible sensation of strangulation made him frenzied. He struggled wildly to free himself, but there was no place to get any leverage. A murderous grin was on Rarick's face.

Joe tried to yell out that he gave up, but the blood in his throat changed it to a horrible snarl.

A great wave of blackness passed over the choking man's mind, as unconsciousness began to succeed the terrible torture. Then outraged nature made one final reaction. Joe's body went into one great, spasmodic convulsion. His whole form grew suddenly rigid and shot upward with one great heave that was not dictated by his conscious mind. Rarick's hand suddenly slipped from his chin and their faces almost met. And at that moment the great mass of blood in Joe's throat was thrown out. The loathsome mess struck Rarick full in the face.

Rarick leaped to his feet, gagging while he rubbed his face frantically with the sleeve of his shirt. Joe managed somehow to roll over on his face, but he could do no more. He was too utterly spent and sick to move.

A few minutes passed, and then Rarick walked

over to his fallen foe and spurned him in the ribs with his toe. His own face was a bloody smear from Joe's blood that he had not been able to wipe away.

"Well, I guess that'll do fer you this time, Kidder," he said. "Yo're licked, but don't think I'm through with yuh. I'll never be satisfied till I see yuh lose every dollar yuh've got, an' in jail waitin' tuh be hung."

He went over to his horse and climbed on. He seemed to take it for granted that Vivian had been unable to watch the fight, but he headed back toward the schoolhouse. Half way there he met the people coming back with the teacher.

"I'll take my gun now, Vivian," he said with a ghastly grin on his stained face.

They all looked at him in dumb silence, and the girl could not restrain a shudder of horror. He took his gun and belt from the girl's saddle horn.

"Did—did you kill him?" Vivian whispered, terrified and apprehensive.

"No, I just give him a damn good licking, but he'll prob'ly need help gittin' on his horse," Rarick said, and rode on.

Curiosity rather than kindness caused the election crowd to follow the girl to the scene of the battle. With a little cry of pity Vivian flung herself from her horse and ran over to the defeated rancher. She knelt and tried to turn him over on his back.

"Oh, Joe, I shouldn't have let you fight," she moaned.

"Wasn't yore fault," Joe murmured weakly, his face still toward the dirt. "Go 'way, won't yuh? I'm all right."

His wish was not to be granted, for Cleary and another man promptly turned him over, and his ghastly appearance brought varying ejaculations from the crowd.

"Looks like Rarick shore give yuh a trimmin'," Cleary said with a brutal laugh.

With their help Joe got to his feet and staggered over to his horse. He was still too weak to walk alone, and would have much preferred to have been left alone there on the grass. But now that they had him up he wanted only to get on his horse and get away.

They boosted him into the saddle, and clinging weakly to the horn he rode away—toward home. For a minute Vivian Jackson considered going with him, but Mrs. Cleary put her arm about the girl. "Let him go, dearie," she advised. "He ain't worth yore trouble—an' he wants tuh be alone anyway."

For the first time in his life Joe Kidder was licked. The first part of his ride home he was still in a daze, but as his brain began to clear he reviewed the fight. He did not know just why Rarick had not finished strangling him, for to the best of his remembrance he had been utterly helpless. It

was not the licking he minded so much as it was the gloating that the neighbors would do. He had tried so hard to shoot square with everybody, and all he was to get from it was jeers and taunts.

So confident had he been of his own strength that it had seemed a sheer impossibility to him that anybody could serve him as Jim Rarick had. It shook his confidence in every way. He had been licked physically, did not old Tony King and the others have him licked on the range? What was the good of anything? While he was begging favors from a supercilious Indian agent they might be doing anything to his cattle. But if he continued to oppose the authority of the Indian police he was sure to get into serious trouble, and if Comanche Charley did have a legal lease then the damages would pile up and break him.

And he had no doubt that he had forever lost the friendship of Vivian Jackson. She had surely meant what she said when she threatened never to speak to him again if he fought Rarick. True enough she had spoken to him, but that was under the stress of great excitement. When next he saw her she would probably refuse to speak.

It seemed to him then that about everything had happened to him that could happen, but he was soon to find out differently. When he got home he found Lute Marsh waiting for him with a horse that reeked with lather.

"Good gad, Joe, what's happened tuh yore face?" Lute demanded.

"Had a run-in with Jim Rarick again—an' got licked," Joe answered briefly. "What's wrong? Yuh've been runnin' yore horse."

"Hell of a lot wrong, Joe. Them two Injun police was found murdered this mornin', an' they're accusin' you o' doin' it. Soon's we heard about it Jack told me tuh fog down here an' tell yuh tuh beat it."

Joe's mouth suddenly went dry. He had had a row with the Indians the day before; had knocked one of them off his horse and disarmed them both. Later he had made a foolish threat before his enemies as to what he would do if the Indian police tried to interfere with him. It certainly looked bad. He could not prove where he had been from the time he left Tony King's camp until he got home.

Troubled as he was he felt sorry for the two Indians. Undoubtedly they had been sent to perform their duty, and they had met with foul play. Who had killed them, and why? If only he could experience some sudden flash of inspiration that would answer those questions!

But no inspiration came—only negative answers to every theory he could think up. Tony King? No. The Indians were trying to protect King. The same held true with regard to Comanche Charley. In fact it all simmered down to the one damn-

ing fact that he, or his men, were the only people on the range who had a possible motive for the crime, unless——

The thought that came to his mind was abhorrent. Surely no one would be black-hearted enough to murder innocent men for the sole purpose of being able to blame somebody else with the crime, and yet he could find no other motive. If it had occurred later in the season when there were other Indians around he might have thought it was some of them; for there were tough characters on the reservation who were continually in conflict with their own police. But these two Indians had come on the train, and there was not another Indian in the vicinity. There was no other conclusion possible than that they had been murdered by some white man rider on Warm Spring Mountain. Yet here he ran against the same objection that had previously occurred to him. His own men were the only ones who had a possible motive.

"Listen, Lute," he said, "are yuh sure that none o' you three boys had anything tuh do with that?"

"Dead certain. Me an' Vick Yoakes was ridin' our heads off with the cattle all day till we turned in, an' Jack said he shore hadn't seen a Injun all day," Lute declared.

"Who have yuh seen up there?" Joe asked.

Rapidly Lute gave the names of most of the cowboys, of Tony King, and a few other employers.

"Rarick?"

"Never seen him. Sam Fullmer an' Bill Bunder are lookin' after his stuff—an' some others."

"Comanche Charley?"

"Ain't seen a hair o' that dirty breed. If I do I'll"——

"Better leave him alone," Joe advised. "I don't know what tuh say to you boys, but if I have anything left I'll see that you get your money. In fact I advise you tuh put a lien on the cattle for your wages. I know I ain't got enough in the bank tuh pay yuh all I owe yuh, but I'll do everything I can tuh see that yuh don't lose."

"But what are yuh gonna do, Joe?" Lute wondered.

What was he going to do? Joe wondered if his brain was still addled from his fight with Jim Rarick, for it seemed impossible to think clearly—at least impossible to come to any conclusion that he certainly was right.

If he stood his ground he would be arrested for murder, and the circumstantial evidence would probably be enough to hang him, or at least send him to the penitentiary for life. And while he was battling for his life his enemies would surely contrive to break him financially.

There was something that he thought he ought to remember; a vague, sub-conscious idea that he had heard some remark some place that should shed

light on the matter. Furthermore, he was impressed that it had to do with something Jim Rarick had said; but he did not know what it was. He was almost certain that Rarick had said something to him while he was lying on the ground after the fight, but he had been half unconscious, and for the life of him he could not remember what it was.

If he followed his strongest instinct and fled the country before the officers arrived to arrest him he might be making the worst kind of a mistake. On the face of it it would have the appearance of guilt, and then if he was apprehended his flight would be the one thing needed to insure his conviction. He knew there was no reason for the common belief that an innocent man would not become a fugitive, but it was a common and legal belief. At least a clever prosecutor could make an average jury believe that it was proof of a guilty conscience. And he had no particular reason to suppose that he could long evade the law.

Still, it was hard for a man like him to contemplate losing his freedom. He would much prefer to die outside with his boots on. He could, he told himself, take to the hills and make his enemies pay dearly before they got him. If he ever did do that he knew that he would never be taken alive. And he was the quiet, determined type that can grow terrible when goaded to desperation. He was very near that point now. If he only knew just who was

responsible for his troubles he would surely resist arrest long enough to get them.

But he did not know. He did know, however, that if he became an outlaw that many misguided, but innocent people would get killed, for no posse would ever be able to get him before he succeeded in making it pay dearly for his life.

There was no question but that if he took this desperate step that everyone, and that included Vivian Jackson, would think he was guilty of the foul assassination of the Indians. That was a powerful argument for him to stay and face the music. But a stronger one was his own aversion to running away from trouble. In its best aspect it looked to him like he was showing the white feather. It took more guts to stay and face the music than it did to go out on the range and fight until he dropped.

He thought, and fought the whole matter out thoroughly before he answered Lute.

"I reckon I'll just wait an' see what they're goin' tuh do about it," he said then.

IX

BEHIND IRON BARS

JOE KIDDER was in jail. A lot of people declared they had been fooled by him. Worthless old Israel Hubbell perhaps expressed the community opinion when he said:

"Som'pin about Kidder allus made me think he'd be a plumb hellion if he ever went on a tear, but he turned out tuh be a false alarm. He let li'l Jim Rarick beat him up, an' then after killin' them poor savages from ambush he jist stood like a sick sheep an' let 'em arrest him. He jist ain't got no guts."

Old man Hubbell had never been more mistaken in anything, and he never thought anything that wasn't a mistake. Joe was fighting hard, though not in the way he wanted to; and he was taking his troubles without a whimper.

He had hired a lawyer, but instead of having the attorney concentrate upon his defense for the murder charge he urged the attorney to find out about the validity of the so-called lease to Comanche Charley.

"Your guess that the whole thing was just a bluff

is wrong," Odell, the lawyer, told him. "Warm Spring Mountain was leased to Comanche Charley. I'm quite sure the lease will be cancelled upon appeal, for the lessee does not belong on the reservation, and furthermore has no cattle of his own to graze on it. It should be easy to prove fraud and collusion. It may help you financially to take an appeal, but it will have little bearing upon the murder trial I fear. The Indian police were sent there to keep all trespassing cattle off the reservation. They were doing their duty when killed."

"What can they do with us if we don't move our cattle off?" Joe queried.

"If it's impractical for them to move your cattle off they can sue you for damages, two dollars each for the tort of trespass, and twenty-five cents per day thereafter as long as the stock remains there," the lawyer said.

"Well, they can't move 'em off without hurtin' their own stock, so we'll let 'em sue," Joe said.

"It's the best way," Odell agreed. "If they get judgment we'll appeal on the grounds that the lease was illegal."

"Then send word to my boys tuh just ride around an' keep outa trouble."

"I have just learned that both Indians were killed by rifle bullets that are the same size as those used in the gun you carried on your saddle," Odell said. "Is there anything you can say about that?"

"No. I carried a rifle all right, as well as a six-gun. The latter on account of the trouble that had come up, and the rifle because we always carry one in the spring on account of wolves and coyotes. I shot it twice that day," Joe admitted.

"No alibi for us there, then," Odell remarked. "One thing I have been trying to find out ever since I learned that the Indians had told about you taking their guns away, was who they told. It seems now that it was Comanche Charley and Rarick. The Indians had come on the train without equipment except their saddles, and they were staying at Rarick's place and using his horses. Does that have any bearing?"

"It has a lot," Joe said with sudden enthusiasm. "I had the class with the Indians in the afternoon, away around on the side of the mountain. They were apparently killed about sundown, certainly before dark, and they couldn't have possibly been back to Rarick's ranch between the time I saw them and when they were killed."

"Well?"

"Don't you see? I rode all over that mountain hunting for Comanche Charley. I couldn't find him or Rarick. Neither one of those birds ever showed up on the range there."

"Then they couldn't have killed the Indians if that's what you're driving at," the lawyer said.

"I thought lawyers were supposed to be shrewd,"

Joe said impatiently. "How could they have known what happened between me and the Indians if they weren't on the range, and the Indians couldn't have got off it?"

"I begin to see your drift," Odell murmured, his eyes beginning to gleam. "You've got an idea that those two men, or one of them, actually did the killing. Naturally, they'd take pains to keep their presence on the range secret. If they get on the stand and swear that they talked to the Indians, and then deny that they were on the range we may discredit their whole testimony. At any rate say nothing whatever about it till the trial and we'll try to surprise them. We'll try to get them to make the statement that they were not there before we question them about their talk with the Indians. You really think that they might be the murderers?"

"By George! I'm sure of it," Joe exclaimed. "I remember now what I've been tryin' tuh git a hold of ever since my last fight with Rarick. It was somethin' he said tuh me when I was still about half dazed. He stood over me an' said, 'Don't think I'm through with yuh. I'll never be satisfied till I see yuh lose every dollar yuh've got, an' in jail waitin' tuh be hung.'"

"He said that?" the lawyer demanded.

"He shore did. I remember it word for word now," Joe said positively.

"Then at least we've got something definite to work on," Odell said enthusiastically. "If you only had some friends out there who could hang around Rarick without his suspecting anything, and kind of sound him out we might spring something in cross-examination that would upset all their plans."

"But I ain't," Joe said drearily. "I ain't got a friend left—outside of my own crew. They'll go tuh the mat for me any time, but everybody knows it."

"That's very bad," Odell agreed. "The worst feature of it is that you'll be tried before a jury of cowmen. They might overlook your killing a couple of Indians—I suspect that if there were no other elements to enter in that the worst you'd get would be manslaughter. But if they can bring in those cattle stealing charges those same cattlemen will be ready and anxious to hang you on general principles. From what I gather that man King will surely try to bring in the matter of the alleged cattle thefts; especially that business of what they call 'the silver cow.' If we can't keep that out it is going to be hard to get an acquittal."

"If I'd only killed that damn critter," Joe said bitterly.

"You may have had enemies who would have got you anyway," the lawyer consoled. "And it is just possible that the same silver cow may yet be the means of discomfitting some of your foes."

Joe's enthusiasm faded soon after his attorney's departure. In the solitude of his cell he felt so utterly helpless and alone. The confinement alone was enough to madden a man like him, who could never endure for longer than a day the crowding of a city if it could be avoided. And while he chafed in idleness he knew that his enemies were active in their plans to complete his ruin. Each time his lawyer came he begged with a pathetic eagerness for him to rush the trial as much as possible and get the whole thing over with.

He really had but one thing to buoy him up during those dreary days, and that was to plan what he would do after he was acquitted, providing that happy consumation came to pass. He had ceased to care greatly whether he went broke or not, but he knew that if he ever got out he was going back to the Portneuf and fight it out with his foes. He had wanted to do that before, but could not because of the charge that hung over him. But with that charge removed he meant to show them what a real fighter was. They had gloated over him once, but they would not gloat again until after they had cause to fear him. Rarick, Tony King, Comanche Charley—he meant to settle with each and every one of them until the account of his injuries and humiliation was squared.

During his imprisonment he got but the most meager reports from his men. He had left Jack

Binney in charge, but Jack did not come to see him, and his written reports, though extremely brief, seemed to Joe to be an effort to keep something from him.

One day Odell informed him that suit had been filed against him by Comanche Charley for fourteen thousand dollars pecuniary and ten thousand dollars exemplary damages. The lawyer was hopeful that the lease would ultimately be declared illegal, but he admitted that it would probably take two or three years before the final decision could be obtained.

Joe was more encouraged by the news that the cattle were now off of the reservation and on their own rightful range. He hoped that that would mean the end of trouble on the range until he got out again.

And then one day Joe had a caller. Like many another prisoner the deadly monotony had made him careless of his personal appearance. He was in his shirt sleeves, and he had not shaved for three days, when the jailor announced, "Lady to see you, Kidder."

Completely mystified as to who the caller could be Joe hastily hauled on his boots, and brushed his hair a bit while the lady was coming down the corridor. And then he looked up quickly to see Vivian Jackson.

"Miss Jackson," he gasped in surprise.

The girl thrust a slender, gloved hand through the bars, and his hand closed upon it hesitantly.

"How are you, Joe?" she said quietly, and with a friendly interest that he could not mistake.

"Why, I—I'm as well as I could be, I reckon," he stammered. "I wasn't lookin' for—for company."

"You needn't apologize," she said briskly. "Jailer, isn't there some place where we can be alone and talk?"

"Well, there's that bench down at the end o' the corridor there," said the man. "Nobody can hear what yuh say, but I'll have to watch you."

"That'll be all right," she said.

The cell door was unlocked, and they walked down to the rough bench and seated themselves upon it. Joe searched his mind, but found he had nothing to say. He was completely dumfounded by the girl's visit, and could only wonder why she had come.

"I'd have been here to see you before but I couldn't get away," she explained calmly. "This is institute week, and so I had a chance to run up and see you."

"O' course I'm glad tuh see you," he said diffidently. "Still, I didn't think you'd want to"——

"You don't suppose for a minute, do you, that I think you could have killed those Indians?" she asked.

"Well, I supposed yuh—everybody"——

"I don't. I know you're not capable of that crime," she asserted firmly. "I've had lots of arguments with Jim Rarick about it."

Somehow the statement did not make him very happy. He was appreciative of her faith, but the thought of her having a great many talks with Jim Rarick raised a savage objection within him.

"How are things goin' at the school?" he asked.

"Just fine," she said earnestly. "Since Dutch Rarick made up his mind to behave himself things couldn't be better."

"You call him 'Dutch' now?"

"Yes; he insists upon it. In fact I flatter myself that the boy is really fond of me. He'll do anything I ask him to do."

"Um," said Joe. He had no confidence in the Raricks.

Vivian gave him a queer glance out of the corner of her eye. "I'm awfully sorry about that fight you had with Jim Rarick," she said. "I feel to blame for it."

"Yuh wasn't."

"At least I might have stopped it."

"Yuh couldn't. But I thought yuh told us that if we fought yuh'd never speak tuh either of us again."

"I—I—didn't realize until then that I couldn't stop it. After Jim was elected school trustee of

course I had to speak to him, and it wasn't fair to discriminate against you," she stated.

"So Rarick got in, did he?"

"By a margin of one vote."

"If I'd only thought to have voted then I could have made it a tie," Joe grinned.

"Joe, isn't there anything I can do for you?" the girl asked with sudden seriousness. "I believe you're innocent, and if there's anything I can do to help find out the guilty party I'll be glad to do it."

Joe's mind flashed back to his long talk with his attorney. Some one to lead Rarick on and get him to make admissions that could be used against him in cross-examination! Certainly Vivian Jackson would be ideal for the purpose if she would do it. But he held his tongue. He would go to the gallows before he would ask her to spy upon his rival.

"I don't see what yuh can do, Vivian," he told her. "Yuh've shore done a lot though by comin' tuh see me. I thought everybody out there was hopin' tuh see me hung, an' it's shore a relief tuh find that somebody ain't."

"They're not going to hang you, Joe, or even find you guilty," she asserted confidently. "I'm going to attend the trial if I have to quit my school, and if I can get away I'm going to come to see you again."

Vivian's visit did more to revive Joe's spirits and bring him out of the deadening lethargy that had

gripped him than all the assurances his lawyer could utter. Even the jailer noticed that he had braced up, for he shaved every morning and kept himself presentable.

"Next time that durn girl comes to see him I'm goin' to keep a closer watch on 'em," that official declared.

The jailer was partly justified in his alarm lest Joe Kidder might be planning a jail-break, but he was wrong in thinking Vivian Jackson had any part in it.

Joe's blood was boiling, and he shook the bars of his cell in helpless rage more than once, so anxious was he to get out. For at last he had got word of what was happening on the range, and the contemptible thing his enemies were doing sent him into a frenzy of righteous indignation.

But no passion of his could weaken the strong, steel bars.

X

BAD NEWS

THERE was a kindly conspiracy of silence on the part of Joe Kidder's employees to keep bad news from him, on the mistaken idea that he had troubles enough. But when Vick Yoakes, the youngest of the riders, and a boy who apparently had never made a personal enemy, was found murdered on the range the thing could no longer be concealed.

It was Jack Binney who visited Joe in jail and told him the particulars. Jack spoke haltingly, for the tragedy had very nearly unstrung him.

"What hurts me is that I sent the kid where he was killed," Jack said. "I was goin' there myself, an' then I got a hunch tuh go elsewhere, an' I sent Vick. He laid out there all night with a bullet in his back before we found him."

"Where did it happen?" Joe asked.

"About half a mile south o' Trail Creek. We'd decided tuh have a man set up there on a pinnacle tuh watch the trail, an' Vick was doin' that when they got him," Jack said.

"What was he watchin' for?" Joe asked sharply.

A flush stole over Binney's sun-tanned face. "We never said nothin' to you about it, Joe, on account we knew yuh was he'pless tuh do anything about it, but there's been some o' the damnedest funniest goin's on out there yuh ever heard of." He hesitated.

"Come clean," Joe insisted.

"Our cattle are bein' misbranded."

"Misbranded? But how is that possible? You mean somebody is workin' 'em over?"

"They shore are. Ain't hardly a day passes, Joe, that we don't find some of our stuff with a Bar-Dash after the JK."

"You mean that the J part of our brand is bein' blotched an' the remainder o' King's brand put on?" Joe asked incredulously.

"No. No part o' the brand is blotched," Binney replied. "That's the queer part of it. As it stands the iron of both outfits is on the critters, but combined so that it don't belong to either one. In other words the brand reads, JK Connected Bar-Dash."

"King, the dirty old skunk!" Joe said furiously. "I savvy it a heap easy. He adds his brand to ours an' then claims that we've done the misbrandin', an' lays claim to all the cattle bearin' the double brand. With me accused of cattle stealin' an' murder he figgers any court will allow his claim. God, if I was only out of here!"

"That's what we figgered—at first," Binney said. "But I ain't told yuh the real queer part yet. King is just raisin' hell because our J is bein' put behind his K. We thought it was all bluff till I rode across his range, an' I find out that it's true. If it keeps on like it has been doin' for a few weeks longer all the stuff of both outfits will have the same brand."

For a few minutes Joe was as much puzzled as his men had been, but then he decided that King was so confident that his claims would be allowed that he was misbranding his own cattle in order to make a court decision imperative.

"The damned old reprobate," he said furiously. "If I could just git a hold of him. Stealin' our cattle is surely bad enough, but when he resorts to murder"——

"Yuh really think Tony would commit murder?" Binney asked.

"Why not? Once a thief always one. He may have tried tuh quit once, but temptation got too great for him. Chances are he got the idee he could steal cattle an' blame it on me when he bought that damn silver cow when she was a calf. By this time he's probably stole so many that he's got scared, an' he hit upon this brand mixin' tuh make him safe. If there's any disputed critter in the lay-out it'll be mine. All the rest will be his," Joe diagnosed.

"I'd never thought about it that way," Jack Binney confessed. "It might have been that Vick

caught 'em in some devilment, or at least they found out he was up on the pinnacle watchin' for 'em an' they sneaked up an' shot him."

"If I ever do git outa here they'll pay for it," Joe gritted, and his foreman looked at him in wonderment. This kind of talk was totally unlike what was to be expected from the old, mild Joe to whom threats of any kind had always been abhorrent.

"Do you suppose Tony King was the one who killed the Indians?" Binney ventured.

"I'd never considered that seriously, but I wouldn't put it apast him," Joe said somberly. The possibility that King was the murderer of the Indians did not help his own predicament at all, and he realized it. His only chance of acquittal had apparently depended upon the possibility of throwing suspicion upon Rarick and Comanche Charley. But he was not thinking of that so much as he was upon the tragedy that had cut short the life of his gay, youthful rider.

The cumulative wrongs had worked a fundamental change in his nature. Once he had desired nothing so much as to get along peaceably with his neighbors, and now he was fuming and fretting himself into a state of nerves, if not of actual illness because he could not get out and fight.

"What'd we better do about it, Joe?" Binney now asked the important question that had brought him to the county seat to see his boss.

The calf round-up was coming on, and the calves of the misbranded cows would have to be marked. The mutilations would not yet be scarred over so it would be possible to really tell who the cattle belonged to. But under existing conditions Joe figured that King would ignore the actual evidence because Joe was in trouble with the law, and his men were not numerous enough to make a fight. They had worked for him so long that they were more like younger brothers to him than hired men, and he had no wish to see another of them killed. So, when it came to outlining tactics for them, he naturally fell back on his old policy of avoiding trouble as much as possible.

"Don't row with them, Jack," he advised. "Keep yore eyes open, but don't take any chances. There's a stamp company here that makes ear tags. Buy a few thousand before you go back an' whenever you see a critter that's had the bar and dash put on lately stop an' put a tag in the ear—an' the calves the same. Then if they question the tags at the round-up just state our case an' then leave it up to our lawyer."

"Is that the way you'd handle it if yuh was outside?" Binney asked curiously. Until just a few minutes before he would have known that it was, but now he had his doubts.

"Not exactly," Joe said drily. "But it's the way I want you to handle it."

"All right, yo're the boss," Binney said, but there was a gleam in his eye which would have shown Joe, had he noted it, that he meant to use his own judgment about certain things.

The days following Binney's visit seemed unending to the prisoner. It had turned out to be a mild, warm spring. Outside everything was activity, and Joe could do nothing but pace up and down his narrow cell and wonder—wonder. Out on the range things were moving. He knew where the cattle would be grazing, and just about how they would be doing. He could picture the riders drifting over the hills, and his legs fairly ached for the feel of a horse between them. It was about this time he noticed that the hair above his temples had turned gray.

Each day he lived through an agony of suspense lest there come news of some further tragedy. Jack and Lute he knew were not fighting men, yet he almost regretted having suggested that they use the ear-tags.

Then one day he picked up a local newspaper that the jailer had lent him, and on the first page he discovered a column headline that sent his eyes hurriedly down the lines looking for names.

ANOTHER RANGE SHOOTING AFFRAY

Portneuf Cowmen Continue to Shoot Each Other up

The first name he found was Lute Marsh, then

his own, then Tony King's and two of King's riders. The article stated two of King's men had attempted to stop Lute from putting an ear-tag on a cow which they claimed belonged to King. Marsh, an employee of the notorious Joe Kidder, the latter now in jail accused of cattle stealing and murder—thus the paper—had resented the interference and opened fire upon King's men. In the interchange of shots one of King's men had been shot in the arm, and the other one had had his horse killed under him. Marsh had disappeared, but the two men he had fought with were positive that some of their bullets had taken effect.

The remainder of the article was a sophisticated, sarcastic comment upon the lawlessness of the cowmen, and concluded with an attack upon the courts for not hastening the process of justice. Were the courts not so lax, maintained the writer, the base and heartless Joe Kidder would not be permitted to delay his trial for an unreasonable time.

Joe crushed the paper in his hands and tore it in two. So much for public opinion. They thought he was stalling, while all the time he was worrying himself gray-headed because they would not hasten his trial.

He had now to worry about Lute; wondering if the boy had been killed or seriously wounded. It did not seem probable that he could have escaped. Jack Binney would be the next one, he supposed

grimly. Then Tony King would have no opposition whatever.

He sent for Odell and demanded that the lawyer hasten the trial someway. "I've got tuh git out of here someway," he raged. "If they don't give me a trial I'll tear their damn jail down some of these nights an' walk out." It was hysteria rather than humor.

"Keep yourself together, Kidder," Odell soothed. "I'm doing all I can, but I doubt if the trial will be held before fall. It's getting hot, and the judge who is to try the case is anxious to get away on his vacation. He's planning a fishing trip up in the Salmon River country."

"A fishing trip! Good God!" Joe threw himself face downward on his bunk and stuffed a corner of his soiled pillow into his mouth.

The long, hot summer months coming on. He to be confined here all that time with nothing to do but eat his heart out, while his men were hounded and murdered, and his property stolen. And all this so that a judge could hasten his vacation a few days!

XI

THE JAIL BREAK

JOE had made no attempts to get intimate with his fellow prisoners, but it had been impossible to ignore them. With the exception of a negro who was called "Wash White" he was the only prisoner charged with so serious a crime as murder, and he was consequently a person of considerable note. Wash White was accused of slaying his paramour, and so he could not rival in interest the man who was supposed to be a wild and woolly gunman of the range. Indeed the negro murderer fawned upon Joe like a tyro at the feet of a master.

Joe and the negro were permitted less liberty than the others, but most of the prisoners when passing down the corridors called out greetings, and frequently there were whispered conversations from cell to cell when the guards were not near.

Most of the prisoners were of the vagrant or petty thief variety, and Joe had no desire to mix up with them. But after he had been in jail a month there were two arrivals who seemed a bit different from the rest. They were "stick-up" men, and habitually talked out of the corners of their

mouths. They were squinty eyed, but on the rare occasions their gaze clashed with another's they were cold as ice and cruelly calculating. There could be no question but that they were real bad men. One of them, "Albany Slim," was tall and dark; though his slenderness made him appear taller than he really was. The other, "Toledo" Hoyt, was smaller, and his hair and eyes were the color of dead ashes.

They had been caught red-handed and it was generally understood that they were sure to draw long terms in the state penitentiary. Both were loud and bitter in their denunciation of the country, and the crudeness of the people. According to them if they had remained in the East their downfall, meaning their capture, would never have happened. There was something inconsistent in their calling the men who had caught them "boobs" and "fools," but they did not notice it.

Joe watched these fellows with a certain interest. They were hard characters; men to whom the sacredness of life or property rights meant nothing. They were frankly criminal in nature, and no matter how innocent they might claim to be when before a jury, they did not try to deceive their fellow prisoners. They were a bit disgusting to Joe, yet he felt that after all they were more manly than the fellows he knew out on the range who made a pretense of respectability to cover up their crimes.

He would have been greatly surprised had he known that he was far more of an object of interest to them than they were to him.

One day while they were taking the half hour of exercise that was daily permitted them Wash White contrived to move close enough to Joe to speak without being overheard.

"Boss, would yo'-all like ter git out'n heah?" he asked.

"Would I?" Joe said bitterly. "I think anybody would."

"Funny thing, boss, Ah was thinkin' de same thing," Wash White grinned. "Ah specs hit ain't goin' ter be long 'fo' we is out."

"There's no chance of gittin' our trials before fall, an' I ain't countin' much on gittin' out then," Joe replied.

"So much mo' reason why we shouldn't wait till dem trials," the negro leered, and for the first time Joe caught his drift.

"You mean—break outa jail?"

"Jes' dat, boss. Now keep dis undah yo' hat: one ob dese days dere's goin' ter be a reg'lar ruckshin heah, an' when it's obah 'bout fo' ob us am g'wine ter walk out," the negro whispered.

"How do you mean?" Joe asked.

The negro shot a hurried glance toward the guard. "Ah got frien's, Ah has," he said. "Ah's already got me some tools. Dey ain' lookin' fo' dese two

stick-ups ter have frien's heah, so de tools am passed ovah ter dem. When we gits ready us foah makes ouah gitaway."

"Why take me?" Joe wanted to know.

"Because we-all figgahs yo' ter be a fightin' fool. An' we reckons dat yo'-all knows mo' about dese mountings dan we does. If we-all kin git inter de hills an' has sumbuddy lak yo'-all ter hide us we figgahs ter git clean away," White whispered rapidly. Just then the guard walked swiftly toward them, and the negro dropped back.

Joe's brain was drumming excitedly. Liberty! The very thought of it sent the blood coursing through his veins with a maddening beat. If he could get out just long enough to square accounts with the men who were hounding him he would not care what happened after that.

It was a long time before his excitement cooled off enough to enable him to think clearly. He realized then that he did not like the three who were to be his accomplices in the jail break. If he let them liberate him he would be under obligations to try to conceal them from the law, and they were men who properly belonged behind bars.

On the other hand it was against Joe's code to betray a confidence, and he could not vision himself going to the officers and telling them the inmates intended a jail break. He held the old prejudice against "tattlers" that he had inherited from his

school days, and his experience with the law had shown it to be his enemy rather than his friend. He decided to hold his peace and let things take their course, and the more he saw of the three men the more he was loath to associate with them. He had just about decided that he would not go with them under any circumstances when it happened.

The jailer was just bringing the prisoners their supper of bean soup and soda crackers when Joe discovered there was something wrong down the corridor. The excitement of the prisoners that he could see evidenced that the jailer was in trouble. As it turned out Toledo Hoyt had inveigled the man into his cell by pretending to hide something hurriedly under his bunk as the jailer approached.

"Here, let me see that," the jailer growled gruffly, and setting down his tray strode over and pulled back the blankets. The next moment the black-jack that had been smuggled in by Wash White's friends descended upon the back of his head.

While Hoyt was releasing his pal a trusty ran screaming an alarm. As he passed by the black's cell White reached out a powerful paw and clutched the fellow by the collar and pinned him against the bars. A moment later Hoyt and Albany Slim dashed up, and the black-jack fell upon the trusty's head with terrific force. With brutal fury the thug knelt to finish up the job, and was only restrained from killing the man by Wash White's plea to be

let out. A moment later they unlocked the negro's door and all three hurried toward the entrance.

"Heah, boys, tu'n mah frien' loose. We-all is sho' g'wine ter need him," Wash White urged as they passed Joe's cell.

"To hell with him," gritted Toledo Hoyt. "We can't stop to turn everybody loose."

"Gimme dem keys," roared White. A moment later the key turned in the lock and Joe found himself free to try to make the break with the others.

He didn't hesitate a minute about accepting his chance. The only thing that mattered for the moment was to get outside those gray, drab walls. Nor was it sunlight and space he longed for; it was a chance to settle with his enemies.

The prisoners were confined in the basement of the courthouse, and the sheriff's office occupied two or three rooms just at the head of the stairway that led to the first floor. There was, however, another corridor that led to the jailer's quarters at another end of the basement. To reach that the prisoners had to go right past the bottom of the stairway.

At the moment of the jail-break there was no one in the courthouse except two deputy sheriffs and the janitor. Two trusties who served as cooks were in the jailer's quarters. As Albany Slim slipped by the stairway one of the deputies, who had been aroused by the trusty's screaming, appeared at the head of the stairway and fired a shot, which missed.

Toledo Hoyt dropped behind a steel barrel that happened to be standing there, and the deputies did not see him.

The two deputies raced down the stairway, but Albany Slim had disappeared. As the officers reached the bottom there came a shot from the back of the basement where Albany Slim had barricaded himself. One of the deputies dropped. The other officer leaped for the protection of the steel barrel, but he made the mistake of doing it backward, so that he could watch for the man with the gun. The next instant he also dropped as Toledo Hoyt swung his black-jack.

"Kill 'em! Finish 'em up," Albany Slim screamed. He would doubtless have performed the act himself, but he had discovered the two trusty cooks, and was covering them with his gun. But his partner was fully equal to the task, and swung his black-jack viciously. While it was in the air Joe Kidder leaped and caught the arm in time to deflect the man's aim and so surely saved one of the deputies from a fractured skull, for there was force enough behind this blow to kill an ox. The fellow had been too hurried before to do more than knock his men unconscious.

With an oath the yegg leaped at Joe, but the latter's fist shot out and the fellow went sprawling backward to crash up against the concrete wall in a half dazed condition.

Joe and Wash White plunged behind the steel barrel as Albany Slim opened fire on them. Joe managed to reach one of the officer's guns and sent a bullet in the enraged yegg's direction. The gun which had been smuggled in by Wash White's friends, and which Albany Slim had in his possession, was a .32 caliber, and the fellow suddenly decided that he did not want to stop to exchange shots against the .45 Colt's that Joe had got possession of. He rushed into the kitchen, and his pal collected his scattered wits and followed him.

The deputy who had been shot was not seriously wounded, though it would have fared hard with him had he been hit with a heavier slug. Now he made an attempt to raise his gun but Wash White grabbed it away from him.

"Bes' t'ing fo' yo' ter do, boss, is jes' ter lay yo' haid right dere on the flo'. We done sabed yo' life once, but we-all ain't no life guards," the negro said.

"Come on, boss," White urged Joe, as the latter stood hesitating what to do. "We-all ain't got no time ter fool away. Won't be long now till de hull town'll be on ouah heels."

Joe realized that the negro was right. Had he known how vicious were the two yeggs, and what was going to happen he would have overcome his prejudice and warned the officers of the impending break. It was too late for that now. He had saved

the life of at least one of the deputies, and probably both of them. He would get no credit for it and desired none, but the way to freedom seemed open, and he could see no use in turning back now.

"Come on," he said huskily, and led the way toward the kitchen. There was a door that opened into the back yard of the courthouse, and by the time they reached it people were running toward the front of the courthouse from the streets. The janitor had reached the front steps and was howling the alarm at the top of his voice.

It was just growing dusk, but Joe could see Albany Slim and Toledo Hoyt legging it in the direction of the railroad yards. He had no desire to accompany the thugs anywhere they went, and he realized that his own best chance to escape depended upon the mob following those two. Already the pursuit was on, led by two eager lads on bicycles, who were anxious to keep the fugitives in sight, without getting too dangerously close to them.

"This way," Joe said to the negro, and led the way around the side of the courthouse, away from the sight of the crowd. The negro followed obediently.

They came to a coal chute leading into the basement. The coal room was locked from the inside, but the probability of prisoners entering from the outside had never been considered.

"Into that, an' slide down far enough tuh let me git in," Joe ordered.

The negro obeyed, and Joe hastily climbed into the zinc lined chute after him.

"Ah'm slippin' boss," White complained. "Iffen I drap inter dis coal bin no tellin' if I eber will git out."

"Grab my foot," Joe said obligingly, and the negro did. Joe hooked his fingers over the board at the mouth of the chute and hung on for dear life. The coal chute was slick as so much ice, and with the big negro pulling on his leg it was no sinecure to hold on.

Half a dozen times people raced by the chute, and each time Joe felt certain that they would surely pause to look down the chute, or would at least chance to see his knuckles, but they were all in too big a hurry to look somewhere else to bother about such an unlikely hiding place as a coal chute. The deepening twilight kept them from observing his fingers. Each time they passed on he experienced such an overwhelming feeling of relief that he began to think it was worth the suspense in order to get such a sensation.

They must have remained there nearly an hour, for it had grown dark, and the outside commotion seemed to have entirely subsided before they began to think about crawling out. Joe had managed to hitch himself up to where he could hook his elbows

over the end of the chute, but his arms ached, and the leg which sustained Wash White had long since gone to sleep.

Getting out presented something of a problem. The chute was too slick for a man to climb up it unaided, and Joe was not at all sure that he had the strength to drag the burly negro up with him. It occurred to him that he might very easily kick the negro loose and let him drop down into the coal bin. In that way he would be free from the fellow, and he knew that he would much rather take his chances alone. Yet he owed his own chance entirely to White, and it was a very unsportsmanlike thing to do, to turn against the fellow now.

"Dig in yore heels an' help me all yuh can," Joe whispered. "We're goin' out."

"Ain't nothin' but a caterpillar could navigate dis heah chute wid success, but ah'll make de bes' imitation ob one whut I kin," Wash promised.

Inch by inch Joe drew himself out, and the loud breathing, and the sound of hob nails scratching on zinc testified that Wash was doing his best; though that best seemed to lighten Joe's burden but little.

At last Joe was able to get his body outside, and by turning over he was able to drag the negro out after him. They stood up and looked around, but the courthouse yard seemed vacant. No matter how long it lasted, Joe realized with a feeling of exultation that he was once more a free man.

XII

THE FIGHT

JOE KIDDER had but one thought—to get back on the Portneuf range as quickly as possible. He did not feel any more like a jail-breaker than he did a law-breaker. When he had finished his business out there he knew that he would voluntarily return to the jail and give himself up, if he was still living.

"Our best chance is tuh avoid anything that looks like sneakin' or crawlin'," he said to his companion. "They'll likely be lookin' for us along the railroad tracks, so we'd best go the other way an' walk along like we were tendin' strictly to our own business."

"Which Ah'll say we sho' is," Wash declared.

"I'm headin' for the hills east of here, but it's exactly where they'll be lookin' for me to go. I expect tuh have tuh do some hard fightin' tuh stay clear for a while an' just a little vacation is all I'm aimin' at," Joe said suggestively.

"Boss, Ah knows dat iffen Ah goes on mah own hook dem dicks will hab me behind de ba'ahs in no time. Ah got frien's but de dicks ain't gonna look

nowhar else foh me but dere. Ah reckons dem hills look plumb 'greeable ter me," Wash said.

"Mebbe you can manage tuh hide out there for a few days an' then slip back tuh yore friends," Joe said. "Come on."

Once away from the courthouse they felt much safer. They chose a quiet street and walked boldly along toward the edge of town. Several times they met people, when it was impossible to dodge them by crossing the street, but they passed by in seeming indifference to strangers. Twice the people they met turned and looked after them, but Joe managed to restrain the negro's desire to run, and the people went on. In the darkness it was doubtful if the folks they met were able to tell whether they were white men or negroes.

Joe felt reasonably certain that as soon as the officers had time to organize a man hunt that they would watch all the roads very closely that led to the Portneuf range. They would probably expect him to steal a horse and cut through the hills to his own stamping ground. Or at least that would be one of the possibilities they would figure on. And he meant to do just that, notwithstanding.

At the edge of town they left the highways and took to the fields. Once, when they ventured close to a main road in order to cross the bridge over a deep canal they found it guarded by three well-concealed men. Had they approached the bridge

from the road they would surely have fallen into the trap. As it was they came carefully picking their way through the brush that lined the canal bank, and so saw the men there without being themselves observed. They went back and looked at the cold, slimy water resentfully.

"Me, Ah never felt lak I needed a bath less'n Ah do dis heah minute," Wash shivered.

"An' yuh'll never need one worse than yuh will after we swim across here," Joe added.

There was no help for it. Joe took off his clothes and making a compact bundle of them tied them approximately upon the back of his head and neck. Wash watched him shiveringly, but could not bring himself to expose his body to the cold, night air. Down in his heart Joe rather wished that the canal would turn the negro back. But when Joe let himself down into the unclean water he heard a splash behind him. They reached the other bank neck and neck.

The negro crawled out and shook himself like a dog; then he stood and chattered while Joe drew on his clothes. Most of Joe's garments had remained dry. He had been particularly careful to keep his boots where they would not get water in them, for he knew well the anguish of walking in water-soaked boots that drew the feet.

They had not gone far before Wash began to lag and complain that his feet hurt him, and that his

heavy garments made it hard for him to keep up. Joe neither urged the negro to keep up, nor discouraged him.

It was only five or six miles from the town to the foot of the mountains, and this also marked the line of the Indian reservation. Joe thought about trying to borrow a couple of horses from some farmer, while the owner was asleep, but decided against it. Farm horses would surely be missed early in the morning, and that would let the officers know that he had come this way. They had plenty of time to get well into the hills before the approach of daylight, and then he hoped that they might be able to capture a couple of Indian ponies upon which to resume their journey.

He had no illusions about what would happen to him if he fell into the hands of the Indians. Believing as they did that he had murdered two of their tribesmen they would not treat him gently. Indeed, he would be lucky if they finally decided to take him back to jail. Yet it was only forty miles across the reservation to his own range, and over a hundred if he went any other way.

By the time it was daylight both of them were ready to crawl under a patch of chaparral brush and rest themselves. The long confinement in jail had made Joe soft, and Wash had been lagging farther and farther behind, and talking to himself as they increased the distance from town.

"Dere's jes' one t'ing Ah'd lak ter know," Wash remarked as he burrowed far into the brush. "Dat is, when do we eat?"

"From all I can see now it'll be when one or the other of us turns cannibal," Joe said, as he folded up his hat for a pillow.

Wash rolled the whites of his eyes, then stripping a few leaves from the chaparral he stuffed them into his mouth. A moment later he spat them out.

It was mid-afternoon when Joe awoke and looked around. His companion was still sleeping. Wash lay flat on his back; his great thick lips were widely parted, revealing a huge patch of red membrane, and his rows of uneven, yellow teeth reminded Joe of weather-beaten tombstones in an abandoned graveyard.

For a moment Joe experienced a feeling of acute nausea. He had come to this: hiding out in the thickets like a hunted coyote, and with a brutal ignorant negro murderer as companion! It was hard for him to believe that he was the same Joe Kidder who, not long before, had been a cattleman with malice toward none, respected in his community, and an ingrained desire to do justice to his fellow men.

He stuck out his foot and rudely jarred Wash awake. The negro sat up with a half stifled yell, and a look of terror in his eyes.

"Don't be scared," Joe soothed. "There's nothin'

happened—an' that yell o' yore's wouldn't do us any good if there had."

"Boss, Ah was dreamin' dat yo'd tu'ned cannibal, an' was jes' sockin' yo teef inter me when yo waked me up," Wash apologized.

When the negro was awake he did not look quite so repugnant. Joe turned away and looked around. They were high on the side of a north hill slope, and below them lay quite a deep canyon. The grass on the other side of the canyon had the golden color of early summer, and the tops of the occasional groups of aspens swayed lazily in the afternoon breeze.

What gripped Joe's attention was a bunch of perhaps twenty horses grazing on the next ridge. They were close enough that he could see they were saddle stock, of the Indian variety. Immediately he began to itch to catch one of them.

"Ever ride a horse?" he asked Wash.

"Ah never rode many hosses, but Ah was sho' death on mules when Ah was a kid down in Alabam'," Wash replied.

"I've got an idee them are mostly gentle old squaw ponies, an' if we just had a knife I figger we might mebbe ketch a pair of 'em."

"A knife? Fust time I eber heerd tell o' kotchin' a hoss wid a knife—but heah's yo' knife. Whut yo'-all aimin' ter do—ham-string dem cayuses?" Wash asked, suddenly holding out a big, bone-

handled knife that held a blade nearly six inches long.

"Where'd yuh git this toad-stabber?" Joe asked. "They was darn careful tuh take my knife away from me—an' it looked plumb harmless compared to this."

Wash permitted himself a wide grin. "Yo'-all didn't figgah dat Ah'd let dem two stick-ups have *all* de implements my frien's smuggled inter dat jail did yo'?"

"I see," Joe replied, and began to pull off one boot. The boots he was wearing were of good quality leather, and came nearly to his knee. Without ceremony he started at the top of one and began cutting off a string that was about half an inch wide. An inch of the top gave him a string about two feet long. He kept on cutting around and around the boot top until he had a strong thong about ten feet long. Then he cut a similar thong from the top of the other boot. He tied the strings together and made a small loop in one end.

"Not a very long lasso rope, but it's about as far as a man can push it with this light material," he said. "Here's hopin' no critter decided tuh take a run on it."

He handed the knife back to Wash, and then they set out to stalk the little band of horses. Joe concealed himself behind a bush in a little draw ahead of the horses, while Wash walked slowly up behind

them. At sight of the negro the horses began to walk away; proof that they were not in the least wild. As they came close Joe observed that they all had saddle marks, and he picked out the ones that he thought were probably the oldest and gentlest.

The easiest one to catch, he decided, was an old buckskin that was at the head of the band. When they were a couple of rods away Joe stepped out in sight. If they broke and ran then their quest would be hopeless. But as he had hoped they would do they looked at him a moment, and then turned back. Finding Wash behind them they became confused for a moment, and the men crowded in upon them. Of a sudden they broke and ran in all directions, and the old buckskin Joe was watching threw up his head and made a wild dash to get past Joe. He passed within ten feet of the man and at the right moment Joe threw out his slender, uncertain string lasso. Joe was a good roper, but as much by luck as because of skill the loop dropped over the pony's ears. Unfortunately the leather thong did not slip good, and the loop was back against the buckskin's shoulders before Joe could pull up the slack.

Joe did not dare dig in his heels lest he break the slender thong and lose his boot tops as well as the pony. All he could do was to try to keep up, and gradually exert enough pressure to stop the run-

away. The old buckskin was not at all convinced that he had to stop, and he did his slow but energetic best to escape. Joe wrapped the end of the string around his wrist and held on. For a short distance Joe was able to keep up, but his heels were going higher and higher, and he had the utmost difficulty in getting them back on the ground before the pony jerked him along again.

Wash White was pounding along behind yelling, "Whoa, boy, whoa!" at the top of his voice.

Finally Joe could keep up no longer and he took a header down the side of the hill. He still had the leather wrapped around his wrist, and he turned two complete somersaults before coming to rest upon his back. He was half stunned by the fall, and it was a minute before he turned over on his belly and looked along the leather line. At the other end of it, snorting and trembling, stood the old buckskin. When Joe fell he jerked the loop up nearer the old fellow's ears, and the pony responded to the pull like any well broken horse.

"Boss, if yo' hadn' stubbed yo' toe yo'd jes' nat'raly run plumb aroun' that hoss an' spit right in his face," Wash flattered.

"What the hell did you mean by hollerin' 'Whoa!' " Joe demanded. "This is an Injun cayuse. He can't understand English."

"Boss, I was jes too excited ter bresh up on my Injun," Wash grinned.

Anyway, they had a horse. The other horses were now galloping wildly away, and there was no hope of capturing another one. The buckskin would have to carry both of them. Fortunately it was a sturdy animal, and being an Indian pony it was used to carrying heavy loads. Joe decided, however, that for a while at least it would be better for them to take turns riding. He fashioned an Indian bridle, by the simple process of doubling up the thong, and making a couple of loops around the horse's lower jaw, and then invited Wash to take the first turn at riding.

"All right, boss, but de way Ah feel right now Ah'd a heap ruthah eat dis heah hoss dan ride him," Wash declared.

Joe was no stranger to the Indian country because he had ridden on almost every Indian round-up since he had settled in the country. He knew how to find his way across to where he wanted to go, but he could not tell where or when they might run across some Indian.

By keeping in the coulees and the brush as much as possible he hoped to avoid being seen. It would not be long until it was dark, and then they could take a straightaway course, and be on the other side of the divide before morning. Though both were hungry Joe felt that they could fast one more day without fatal results to either of them. The poor food they had received at the jail in a way enabled

them to endure hunger better. Joe, at least, was used to it.

They came to a small creek which they had to cross, and because its banks were thickly lined with brush they had to seek a ford. When they found it the water was too wide for a man to jump, and so Wash, who happened to be walking at the time, jumped on the pony's back behind Joe.

The pony splashed across, and the moment it was over they suddenly saw three Indian bucks who had been silently playing poker on a red blanket behind a willow bush. Two of the Indians were young bucks, and the third was a man of forty. They were as much surprised as Joe and Wash.

All three bounded to their feet like startled elk, and then the older Indian's eyes narrowed into slits.

"Ugh!" he grunted angrily. "Where you ketch-um my hoss?"

XIII

A SUPPER UNDER DURESS

JOE had ridden on the reservation enough for most of the bucks to know him by sight, and though he did not recognize the two younger Indians he had little doubt that they knew who he was. And he did know the tall Indian who had asserted ownership of the buckskin. This fellow was one Tommy Racehorse, a notorious gambler, and generally considered a bad Indian to monkey with. He also knew, and cursed, the Indian proclivity for gambling, which would cause them to stop and play cards whenever they met, if there was room to spread a blanket.

The matter of the buckskin pony was enough to get them in bad, regardless of the fact that Joe was a badly wanted man on account of the murder of the two Indian policemen. It was a matter that required quick thinking—and acting.

"You think this is your horse, Tommy?" he asked. At the same time he twisted slightly to one side, and in so doing gave Wash White a thrust with his elbow hard enough to unseat the colored

man and cause him to fall in a huddle beneath the buckskin's belly.

All three Indians had grasped their weapons at first sight of Joe, and were scowling menacingly. But a mishap such as had happened to Wash appealed to their sense of humor, and the two young bucks suddenly broke into gales of laughter. The old buckskin suddenly reached out and gave Wash a harmless cow-kick, which increased their hilarity. As Wash scrambled out on all fours the eyes of all the Indians were momentarily upon him. Joe seized that moment to pull the deputy sheriff's .45 Colt's out of his shirt.

"Git yore hands off them guns," he ordered crisply.

The two younger Indians gave a startled look, and obeyed like the handles of their guns had suddenly turned hot. Tommy Racehorse, though not having the courage to exchange shots with the white man, was too dignified to accede to the demand. He kept his hand on his gun, and glared back defiantly.

"Take that gun away from him, Wash," Joe ordered.

"Didn't yo' heah de boss say ter drap dat gun?" Wash demanded indignantly.

Seeing that he was to be humiliated by losing his gun unless he used it the Indian, who was no coward, decided upon the latter course. His gun was

just clear of the holster when Wash White's great fist landed on his jaw and knocked him a rod. The Indian sat up a moment later, but he had been knocked loose from his thoughts, and made no effort to retrieve the gun that had dropped out of his hand while he was falling. Wash walked over and contemptuously kicked the weapon into the brush.

Joe's gun had shifted to the younger Indians, and he threw one leg over the buckskin's withers, and sitting sideways, faced them. He knew that they could speak good English.

"I don't mean to harm you boys," he told them, "but I can't take any chances with you. Stand right still till Wash collects yore guns."

Their looks were murderous now, but they had to allow the negro to disarm them.

"Where's yore camp?" Joe asked.

They sullenly refused to answer.

"Lookit heah, boss," Wash spoke up. "Us kain't take no chances wid dese heah savages. Iffen we lets 'em go dey's sho' gwine ter bring all de police an' posses in de country down on us. I reckons dere ain't no uddah way ter do wid dem dan ter jes' knock 'em on de haid an' hide de bodies heah in de bresh."

Joe smiled at first, for he thought the negro was joking. A moment later, however, he saw that White was in dead earnest. Instantly his own face became stern.

"None of that, White," he shot out. "We're not murderers—or at least I'm not, an' you won't be while yuh're in my company."

"All right, boss, but Ah sho' does feel dese heah savages air a heap likely ter git we-alls hung," Wash grumbled.

"Listen, Tommy Racehorse," Joe said, addressing the older Indian. "We want supper, savvy? Now if you don't show us the way to yore camp an' feed us we'll have tuh tie yuh up tuh the willers here, an' yuh'll have tuh stay till somebody comes along an' finds yuh."

The Indian only glared defiantly.

"An' we'll also take yore horses an' saddles along," Joe added.

Instantly the Indians' features changed. They could endure physical maltreatment without a murmur, but it was another thing to lose their property. All three were well mounted, and they all sported nearly new saddles. Joe had figured upon this being his best shot.

"My camp—he two mile from here," Racehorse said grudgingly.

"All right. We'll just take all yore cartridges, but we'll leave you yore guns," Joe said. "You show us the way to yore camp, an' have yore squaw feed us. An' the first time any one o' the three o' you makes an awkward move I'll turn this nigger loose on yuh."

Wash White had suddenly become a thing of terror to the Indians, who had comprehended perfectly what he had desired to do to them. And the fiendish looks the negro gave them were a constant reminder.

Joe and Wash mounted the old buckskin again, and they all set out for the Indians' camp. Joe hoped sincerely that it would prove to be a small one, but in any event he felt that the constant threat of death hanging over Tommy Racehorse would insure their safety as long as they remained in the camp. After they left would be different, but each problem had to be solved as it came up.

Joe was beginning to wonder seriously what he was going to do with Wash White. Had he run across White a few months before he knew that he would unhesitatingly have apprehended the fellow if he could, and turned him over to the officers. He thought it a sad commentary upon his own morals that he had helped this murderer to escape, and turned him loose to prey upon society. But he had not done that. So long as Wash was with him he knew that he could handle him, and Joe began to realize in a vague way that he must not lose track of the negro. It was a duty he somehow owed to society and to Wash himself.

With suffering had come understanding, and Joe had always possessed a wide degree of tolerance. He knew that Wash White was probably guilty of

the crime he was charged with. In a moment of ungovernable animal rage the fellow had killed. At any moment he was liable to kill again. But the negro was primitive, and with no conception whatever of right or wrong. Punishment, for all the good it might do, would be wasted upon him. The negro was safe enough so long as he was constantly watched by some one able to control him. Joe had used the negro to effect his own release, had helped him along as a matter of fair play; but he had intended from the first to get rid of the ignorant negro at the first opportunity. It was rapidly dawning upon him that if he slipped away from Wash, and the negro committed some odious crime that he would be directly responsible. Like it or not it was up to him to stick with the negro until they came to the end of their adventure, whatever that might be.

The Indian camp, located upon a small creek, to Joe's relief proved to be a small one. A temporary brush wikiup, a dilapidated buckboard, and a few old saddles appeared to compose the equipment in sight. Two squaws, one young, the other of middle age, both the wives of Tommy Racehorse, five or six papooses, and an ancient, nearly blind old couple who moved dodderingly around the fire seemed to number the total population. Joe guessed that Racehorse had been out looking for game of one kind or another and had run across the two young

bucks from another camp, and had proceeded to clean them.

Joe ordered Racehorse to have his squaws prepare a meal for them, and warned him to have it ample. While the wondering squaws were doing the cooking Joe kept the three bucks lined up against the buckboard, and also kept his eye upon the juveniles of the camp.

As for Wash, that worthy was entirely too preoccupied watching the culinary operations to be of any use. The negro's eyes fairly popped from his head as he saw the oldest squaw mix bread and put the raw dough into the hot ashes and rake hot coals over it. Joe was more interested in watching the way they prepared the meat he expected to eat, but there seemed nothing objectionable in the way they broiled it, and so far as he could tell it had come from an animal that had been really butchered, and not one that had just died on the range.

The young squaw made tea in an old syrup can, and presently the older one prodded around in the ashes and drew out the brown, flat loaf of bread. The squaw blew the ashes off the bread, and when that failed to remove them all she took the skirt of her greasy Mother Hubbard and wiped it carefully.

"Squaw say, '*tabi-dick*'," Racehorse grunted. Joe knew that was the Indian word for dinner, and he stood on no ceremony about accepting the invitation, grudgingly as it was given.

The papooses watched them hungrily as they devoured everything offered them, but they were not worrying about whether the Indians got anything to eat just then or not.

It was nearly sun-down when they finally finished. "Squaw," said Wash, "yo'-all has got a queer idear ob cookin', but Ah ain't enjiyed a meal so much since mah ole mammy uster fry de spring chickens I uster steal fum de white folks down in Alabam'."

"Racehorse, if I had any money I'd pay yuh for the grub, but I've fed many an Indian at my ranch an' that ought tuh square us," Joe said. "I don't want to steal yore horses, either, but I'm afraid we'll have tuh borrow the two these young bucks are ridin'. I'll try tuh return 'em just as quick as I can, an' if anything happens I'll see that they git pay for 'em. I'm also goin' tuh leave yuh very much afoot to-night, but I caught that old buckskin an' I reckon you can. Yuh see I don't want yuh tuh be in a hurry about tellin' anybody yuh seen us. Furthermore, we need sleep, an' we're goin' tuh take turns sleepin' right out here in the brush. If any one o' yuh takes it into yore head tuh ramble off yuh may run into a bullet. Savvy?"

The last remark was thrown in purely as bluff, in hopes that it might deter the Indians from giving the alarm until morning. If it made any impression the Indians did not reveal it in their faces. Their

expressions did not change an iota. Had it been white men there would have been vociferous protests over the loss of the horses, but the Indians affected to not even hear what was being said.

"Another thing," Joe went on undismayed. "I know you think I killed those two Indian police. I didn't. If I was that kind of a man I'd kill you people now to help my own escape. Think that over."

For the first time the Indians appeared to pay any attention. The young bucks looked at each other, and then over at Tommy Racehorse. It was only a fleeting glance, but Joe thought that it was a questioning one.

They had already confiscated the two young Indians' gun belts and holsters, as well as all the cartridges they possessed, and so they had nothing left to do except mount the two horses, and drive the rest of the stock well away from the camp. The looks of the young Indians as they watched their good horses and saddles being taken were black with hatred, but they did not move a muscle or voice a protest. Joe was really sorry for them. He was aware that the property he was taking was valuable to the Indians and a source of great pride. And they probably did not expect ever to see either horses or saddles again. Joe was sincere in his promise to them that they would not lose, and he meant to keep the promise if he lived long enough

to order his estate to reimburse them. They could not know that, but Joe realized that if he was to escape from the law long enough to deal with his enemies he would have to be mounted and armed, and there was no other way in sight except to impose on the Indians.

"Boss," said Wash, when they were well away from the Indian camp, "I sho' does admire de way yo'-all han'les t'ings. Ah'm powerful glad, Ah is, dat we didn't kill dem Injuns. Fum heah on Ah does jes' as yo' says."

Joe did not say anything. Morning would find him back on his range, and then he would be in position to begin settling up certain debts which he had brooded upon for weeks.

"Boss, whar does we-all go now?" Wash asked after a long period of silence.

"Wash, we're goin' tuh take the trail of a silver cow," Joe said with a grim smile in which there was little of fun or humor.

XIV

AN UNWILLING HOST

JOE was aware that the news of his escape would have long since been telephoned to Portneuf. It might even have reached the range, for he had plenty of enemies who would be anxious to close every possible avenue of escape to him. And it would not be so many hours anyway before the Indians would let it be known that he had crossed the reservation.

In a few hours at most the country would be scoured by posses looking for him, and he had already seen enough of their wolfish cruelty to know that nothing but his death would satisfy them. Sometimes, when he thought of that his hand tightened upon the handle of his gun, and his lips closed in straight, hard lines. Then he would relax, and remind himself that he had no quarrel with such people merely because they wanted his blood. They at least thought they were doing their duty by society in trying to remove him, and of course it did not occur to them that they were using him as an excuse to release all their own pent up primitive

passions. So long as he could avoid such people he meant to do it. All he was after was the men who had framed him for murder, and who had killed one or possibly two of his cowboys.

The man he ultimately meant to get was old Tony King. But there would be little satisfaction in merely riding down and killing the old cattleman, much as he deserved it. It was not revenge but vindication that Joe Kidder was out to get. In spite of all his wrongs he would have much preferred to make Tony King acknowledge the long string of crimes he was guilty of and then let him live to bear the disgrace than he would to shed the man's blood. But to achieve that result he would have to start elsewhere and obtain evidence that would render futile any denials the old cowman might make.

For a long time Joe had been sure that the place to start in unravelling the whole crooked business was with the Warm Spring mountain lease, and then work from that one way back to the time when Tony King had bought and marked a dogy calf to start suspicion upon some one, and in the other way up through the series of murders till he found out who had done the actual killing, and who had ordered it done.

With the price that was on his head there was no time for any subtle investigations even if he had been the type to make them. Direct action was the

only thing possible, and Joe had long ago decided where he would start, providing he could lay hands on the man he wanted.

There had been trouble on the range ever since the half breed, Comanche Charley, had made his evil appearance. The man was slippery as an eel when it came to getting out of trouble himself, but Joe had resolved that if ever he got his hands on the fellow that Comanche would shed enough light on the business to enable him to take the matter up with certain others with some real facts at his disposal.

The trouble was that the breed was always hard to find, and Joe could not go riding over the range asking for him. Yet Joe was sure in his own mind that news of his presence on the range would attract Comanche Charley as meat draws flies. And if he showed up he would almost surely hang out with his friend, Jim Rarick.

Calling on Comanche Charley at Jim Rarick's place promised to be dangerous enough. Rarick, as Joe very well knew, was the most dangerous of all his foes, but Rarick also had to be dealt with some way. Joe could only hope that he would be able to encounter the breed when Rarick was not along. The one thing in his favor was that Rarick's ranch on Tumbling Creek was surrounded with brush and timber, but Joe knew that it would be the veriest accident if he found his man without a

long wait, and Tumbling Creek was one of the places where the posses would be likley to hunt for him when they found that he was not at his own ranch.

He had decided that it might take several days to accomplish what he wanted to do, and that meant that he must have a hiding place, and food to sustain him and Wash. He had considered all that thoroughly, and before he had even encountered the Indians he had decided what he would try to do. Certainly it was a more daring measure than the formerly easy-going Joe Kidder would be expected to take.

Among the men who were close followers of Jim Rarick none were more faithful or thicker-witted than Bill Bunder. Had Rarick been able to keep a crew of men Bunder would have been always with him, but as it was the man had to have some other interests. He had accordingly taken up a homestead in a wide canyon about three miles from Rarick's. A creek ran through his place, but its water had long since been appropriated by other ranchers lower down. Bunder was always talking of what he would make of his ranch "just as soon as he got the water." His threat to start legal proceedings against the lower ranchers worried them not at all. Meantime the fellow loafed about his cabin when he was not running around with Rarick, but his farming operations were a joke. Joe Kidder

had decided first of all to pay Bill Bunder a visit.

After driving the Indian ponies a couple of miles Joe abandoned them and then swung into a brisk trot that was timed to get them to Bunder's place just before daybreak. They had not proceeded more than half a mile, however, before Wash White began to voice loud complaints against the roughness of his horse's gait. The way the negro bounced around in the saddle told Joe that Wash's riding ability was far below par.

"Don't choke the saddle horn so. Sit loose in the saddle an' catch yore horse's motion," Joe advised.

"Dat's jes' whut Ah am kotchin', boss," the negro retorted. "Ah jes' kotch de motions so fas' dat Ah don' have time ter be in dis heah saddle on'y 'bout one third ob de time."

Finding his riding instructions useless Joe was compelled to abandon the trot for easier gaits. Much of the time they had to let the horses walk, but whenever the trail was fairly smooth they hit up a long, fast lope. At this speed Wash merely shut his eyes and held on to the saddle horn with all his strength.

"Boss," he said once, "if friction causes fiah dere's sho' gwine ter be a blaze in de seat ob dis saddle fo' long 'less'n we slows up."

Joe felt sorry for him, but he explained the necessity of speed if they hoped to reach a hiding place before morning. Wash was really in a bad

condition when Joe threw down Bill Bunder's wire gate, and they approached the man's cabin.

They were later than Joe wanted to be. It was light enough for them to see clear out across the valley, and above the hills on the opposite side of the valley a brilliant red halo was rising above a still invisible sun. Joe could not see his own ranch, for it was farther north, and the view shut off by a long ridge above the south side of Tumbling Creek. But he could see the little white schoolhouse of the district, and it brought back a flood of memories. There had been a time when he had had the interest of every child there at heart, and it was not that his vanity had been tickled because he had been elected a trustee. In his own boyhood he had been anxious to get schooling, but grim necessity had compelled him to go out and battle for a livelihood. He sympathized with the children, and such progress as the little school had made had been largely due to his efforts.

He thought of Vivian Jackson, and wondered what had become of her. The school, he knew, had been out for some time. Probably she had returned to her home for the vacation, but he could see the Cleary ranch where she had boarded, and he was suddenly tempted to ride over there and find out. He knew it would not do, of course, and dismissed it from his mind; but it was hard to quit thinking about the girl. She had promised to be a witness

of, if not in his trial, but he wondered now if he would ever have a trial, or if she would want to keep her promise now that he had become a jail-breaker.

He got his mind free of these roving thoughts as they neared the cabin. He could not afford to take chances with Bunder. He saw at once that there was no smoke issuing from the chimney, but could not tell whether this meant that Bunder was not at home, or whether he had not got up yet.

Bunder had built a low, slab stable large enough to hold four horses, and they stopped there and led their horses inside. Bidding Wash stay there with them Joe started for the house.

The door of the cabin was closed, but a window was open. Joe got to the side of the window and listened. He had no more than got there when he heard the sound of a pair of bare feet striking the floor, that was followed by a prodigious yawn. Had they been just a few minutes later Bunder would have surely seen them coming.

Joe slipped around to the door and knocked.

"Who the hell is it?" came the startled answer.

"Just me," Joe answered, and suddenly flung the door wide open.

Bunder was sitting on the edge of his bed, and save for one sock wearing only his underclothes. The other sock was dangling in his hand. At sight of Joe Kidder his eyes fairly popped from his head.

He seemed trying to utter sounds, but succeeded only in getting a series of clacking notes with his tongue.

Joe stepped inside, and his hand rested easily on the handle of the gun at his hip. "Wasn't yuh lookin' for me, Bill?" he asked.

"Joe Kidder!" the man got out finally. "Wha—what the hell you doin' here?"

"Just visitin' around among my acquaintances," Joe said with a cold grin. "I take it yuh hadn't heard about me breakin' jail?"

"No-o. How'd yuh git out?"

"It was something of an accident," Joe said. "Better hurry up and dress. I hope you won't mind feedin' a coupla pilgrims."

Bunder drew on the other sock; then he looked up at Joe with a somewhat less vacant look upon his face. "Look here, Kidder, how come yuh tuh land here?" he demanded.

"Because I figgered yuh'd have grub enough tuh last us fer several days, an' that yuh'd probably not have many callers," Joe replied.

An even more pallid look came over the fellow's face. The cool assurance of Kidder frightened him. From the first Bunder had allied himself with Joe's enemies, and he knew that Joe knew it. He could appreciate the fact that if Kidder was desperate enough to break jail that he would be desperate enough for most anything else. He knew very well

that Kidder did not mean to let him get away and spread the news of his arrival. Did he intend to kill him, or what, he wondered.

"Quite a lotta people come here," he ventured, on the faint hope that it might cause his unwelcome visitor to change his mind.

"That'll be all right. We'll try tuh receive 'em properly," Joe said grimly. He stepped back to the door and waved for Wash to come in.

When the ugly visaged negro came in Bunder's apprehensions gave way to panic. "Lemme outa here," he bellowed, and made a wild plunge for the door. It was a foolish thing for him to do, but he lost the power of thought in his fear of death.

Joe could have shot the man down, but he did not wish to indulge in the promiscuous shedding of blood, and he felt that he might have use for Bunder later. He merely blocked the fellow's way, and hurled him back. Bunder, however, was completely lost to reason, and seizing the first missile handy, which happened to be a frying pan, he charged Joe again.

Joe ducked the man's wild swing and catching him around the waist he flung him back into the room. It was an effort that took his wind, for jail had made him short-winded. Then he was whipped into instant action again as he saw the glint of Wash White's knife-blade. An incoherent sound of rage came from the negro as he leaped upon the

prostrate man upon the floor with the evident intention of carving him into small pieces.

Just in time Joe grabbed the negro's arm and twisted it back. White was as big a man as Joe and fully as powerful. For a little while Joe did not know whether he was going to hold the negro or not, and when finally he did subside it was more because of Joe's orders for him to behave than because he was subdued.

"Lucky fo' yo', fella, dat de boss heah has got kind ob a chicken h'aht, but iffen yo' eben looks sideways ag'in Ah'll jes' tear yo' gullet out an' den split it wid mah knife," Wash threatened.

Pale and shaky Bunder got to his feet; his eyes fixed fearfully upon the negro's face.

"Whut yo' wants him ter do, boss?" Wash inquired.

"I want him to build a fire an' cook us some breakfast," Joe said. Then he turned to Bunder and addressed the man crisply.

"I reckon yuh understand about what yo're up against, Bunder, but I'm goin' tuh make myself plain. Before the day's over I know they'll be rakin' this country with a fine tooth comb tuh git us. I figgered this tuh be the safest place for us tuh hide, an' we mean tuh stay here. If you behave yoreself, an' do just as yuh're told at all times nothin' will happen to you. But if yuh try tuh git away it'll be just too bad for you. An' if anybody

happens to come here an' yuh don't obey orders tuh the letter it'll be the biggest mistake yuh ever made. I may go away myself for a while, but this nigger will be with yuh every hour of the day or night, an' yuh can judge for yoreself whether it'll be safe tuh monkey with him. Do yuh think yuh understand yore orders?"

"Yeah, bu-but why did yuh pick on me?" the man faltered.

"One reason," Joe said evenly, "is because yuh're such a good friend to Jim Rarick an' Comanche Charley. To pass away the time after we eat yuh're goin' tuh tell me every damn thing you know about 'em."

XV

A DANGEROUS CALLER

IN reality Joe had not expected to get anything in the way of information from Bill Bunder, but seeing that the fellow was ready to become clay in the hands of the potter he decided to find out if he could not model him somewhat to his own purpose.

It was apparent that Bunder stood in mortal dread of the hard looking negro. Joe decided that it would be well to increase that terror somewhat. He made sure that they had all of Bunder's weapons, and then he called Wash outside for a minute or so and gave him explicit instructions. Under no circumstances was the negro to harm Bunder except under the positive necessity of keeping him from getting away or giving a warning. But in the way of bullying Bunder he was to go as far as he liked.

"Boss, dat am duck soup fo' me," Wash grinned evilly, as he went back inside.

Joe went out to the stable and fed the horses. They had watered them when they crossed Tumbling Creek. The horses were a big problem. He

did not want to be left on foot, but there was danger that somebody might come along and investigate the stable. Bunder had a pasture, but it would be fatal to turn the two Indian horses out there, where they would be sure to excite suspicion if anyone came near. The best he could do was feed the horses from Bunder's grain bin and meager pile of dry hay, and hope for luck. There was a large element of chance in anything he did anyway.

He returned to the cabin and found that Wash had already improved the time to such an extent that Bunder was having the greatest difficulty to keep from having an accident with his simple cooking operations.

"Bill," Joe remarked, when they were seated at the breakfast table, "yuh'll save yourself a lot o' trouble if yuh come clean with all yuh know about the crookedness that's been carried on in this range."

"I dunno nothin'," the man said sullenly.

"Listen: When those two Injun police were here last spring they were stoppin' with Rarick. You was around his place most of the time, or at least out on the range with Sam Fullmer. You an' Sam, Rarick, an' Comanche Charley all know who killed those Injuns, an' yuh know it wasn't me. Now one o' you has got tuh tell me who it was. I'm goin' out after while tuh hunt up one o' the others, but Wash here will keep right on tryin' tuh persuade

you tuh talk—unless yuh feel like unbosomin' yoreself tuh me earlier."

"He'll be talkin' plenty time yo' git back, boss," Wash promised.

"What'll yuh do fer me if I tell yuh what I know?" Bunder queried.

"I'll promise that we won't hurt yuh as long as you obey orders—nothin' more," Joe said evenly.

Bunder remained silent, but he was unable to eat any food.

"Where is Comanche Charley?" Joe shot out.

"Mostly he's at Rarick's, or else at Sam Fullmer's camp when he ain't on the reservation," was the reply.

"I mean now," Joe rasped.

"I—I reckon yuh can find him at Rarick's," Bunder said, and then he proceeded to give them as much information about the breed's movements and habits as he could.

Joe was convinced that Bunder was telling the truth, for in the man's dull brain had obviously been hatched what he conceived to be a brilliant idea. He realized that Joe would be a hunted man, and if he went out after the breed he was almost sure to be caught. Bunder knew that Rarick and Comanche Charley would be far abler to deal with Kidder than he was, and so he was ready to say anything that might serve to relieve him of his unwelcome visitors. It was his very eagerness in tell-

ing how easy it would be to surprise them that betrayed his secret hope.

When he got through Joe calmly told the negro to get some sleep, while he himself stood guard over Bunder. Joe knew that it would be very unwise for him to show himself while the posses which would hunt for him were being raised, and he knew of no safer place than Bill Bunder's cabin. The place was out of the way, and Bunder had few friends. The only danger was that somebody might call to ask Bunder to join the man hunters. If anybody did that it was more likely to be somebody from Jim Rarick's ranch, and they could probably be dealt with for the time being. If they were missed complications might ensue, but it was a risk which had to be taken.

Almost immediately the giant negro was snoring loudly, and Bunder seemed to have recovered some of his confidence. The fellow even ventured to ask Joe for the details of his escape from jail. More to pass the time away than anything else Joe told him considerable about what had occurred.

Joe did not bother to ask Bunder any more questions. He felt he would be more likely to get the truth from the fellow later on, and he had no patience to waste. Outwardly he was calm enough, but it was hard to remain quiet when at any moment he knew a mob of men thirsting for his blood might ride over the hill. Besides that he was

sleepy, but he dared not doze off for even a moment.

The long, tedious day passed at last, and nobody had appeared. Wash White did not awaken until after sun-down, and then it was the odor of cooking food which brought him forth.

"Boss, yo' mean ter say dat we ain't kotched yit?" he demanded with a wide grin.

"We're safe so far," Joe said.

"Does yo' mean ter say dat yo'-all has set up all day jes' ter watch dat trash dere?" Wash demanded with a pretense of astonishment. "Whyn't yo' jes' put a rag in his mouf an' tie him ter de bed lak a pup? Dat's whut Ah'd have did."

When it grew dusk Joe went out and tended to the horses. Bunder's horse was also in the stable, and Joe decided to turn the two Indian ponies in the pasture for the night, with the intention of getting them in again at daylight in the morning. He had just turned them loose and fed Bunder's horse when he caught the sound of a horse coming down the same trail that he and Wash had travelled a few hours before. With a half suppressed curse Joe realized that he would not have time to get the horses back, for the animals had headed to the farthest side of the pasture as soon as they were turned out. They were already out of sight, but that was something in his favor.

For a minute or two Joe stood in a tense, listening attitude. He heard the jangle of the wire gate,

and he was glad that he had had the foresight to stop long enough to put it back up. He became convinced that there was but one man, and then he ran awkwardly but swiftly to the house.

"Take to the brush, you two," he commanded crisply. "Wash, if this feller offers tuh make the least bit of a squawk—use yore knife."

"If he eben whispahs Ah sticks mah ole toad-stabbah inter him, an' den whirls him aroun' on hit," Wash said. The whites of his eyes were showing in great alarm, but he looked unquestioningly to Joe for guidance.

"Lay down out there in the sagebrush an' stay there till I call yuh," Joe said. "It's only one man, an' he'll soon go away."

Joe ran back to the stable and flung himself onto Bunder's horse and raced for a tiny patch of willows a few hundred yards from the house. The grass muffled the sound of the horse's feet, though Joe could distinctly hear the newcomer's horse trotting down the trail.

When he reached the willows Joe dismounted, and clamped his hand over the horse's nostrils to stifle any inclination it might have to nicker. Whoever the man might be Joe hoped that he would decide that Bunder had already ridden away to join the posse, after he had inspected the cabin and the stable and found neither man nor horse.

From where he was Joe could easily see the build-

ings, and he had no more than dismounted than the man appeared dimly in sight. The fellow rode up to the front of the cabin and called out to Bunder. When there came no reply he lifted his voice louder. Joe felt a curious thrill run through him as he recognized that voice. It was Jim Rarick's.

For a moment Joe was strongly tempted to slip over to the house and have it out with Rarick then and there. Only by a strong effort of will did he resist the impulse. His common sense told him that he could do nothing with Rarick even if he got the drop on him. Rarick was the kind of man who would die before he would weaken. Furthermore, Rarick would have sense enough to know that he would soon be missed, and some one would come to see what had happened to him. Joe realized that the best he could do was hope that Rarick would soon go away.

When there came no answer to his third call Rarick dismounted and went inside the cabin. He would find a stove still warm, and—suddenly Joe felt a wave of apprehension striking at his vitals—freshly washed dishes for three still on the table. Joe felt better about it a moment later, when he reflected that it would really be a good thing for Rarick to suppose that two men had come for Bunder, and had remained to have supper with him. Rarick would then probably not be surprised if Bunder did not come to his ranch.

Joe had been worrying somewhat for fear Rarick would visit the stable. If he did he knew that the man was keen enough to observe that there had been three horses standing in the stable for some time. A moment later Rarick came out of the cabin and headed directly for the stable. If he chanced to lift up the lid of the big grain box he would discover the two saddles belonging to the young Indians, and instantly he would know that Joe and the negro had taken refuge there.

Rarick was in the stable nearly five minutes, and it seemed an age to Joe Kidder. It was rapidly getting darker, and when he came out Joe was just able to see him as he went back to his horse and mounted. Was he satisfied that two men had happened along to Bunder's place, casually spent the day with him, and then all three ridden away together for some purpose, or had he looked into the grain box? The question was vital to Joe, but he could only guess at the answer.

When Rarick mounted he turned and rode back up the way he had come. There was only a canyon wood road that way, but a well defined trail led from it over the hills to his own place. Joe heaved a great sigh of relief as he saw Rarick turn in that direction. It was not conclusive evidence that he had found nothing suspicious, but it seemed more probable that he would have ridden on down to the settlement to at least find out if three men had gone

that way, and if so who they were. Everything considered Joe decided that the best thing to do was to assume that Rarick had not become wise to their presence.

A few minutes later Joe returned to the cabin and called for Wash and Bunder to come in.

"Did yuh have any trouble keepin' Bill quiet?" Joe asked.

"Trouble? Boss, Ah was jes' prayin' ever' minute dat he would make a squeak," Wash answered. "Ah had de p'int ob mah knife right ag'in his gizzard ever' minute."

"Fer Gawd's sake, Kidder, call that damn nigger off won't yuh?" Bunder pleaded. "He'd kill me fer the fun of it, just like he says." The man was quite apparently sick.

"Somehow I can't git my mind off the way you hollered when Jim Rarick was about tuh kill me," Joe retorted. "I'm out tuh square some accounts, an' this is yore settlement. I ain't sayin', though, how much further it'll go."

"Honest tuh Gawd, Joe, I never wanted tuh give yuh the rotten deal yuh got," the man said. "If I didn't know they'd git me I'd square the whole thing."

"Then you do know the truth about it," Joe shot out quickly.

Bunder had not meant to make the admission. His fear of the negro had scared it out of him. "I

—I—know a little, but I dassn't tell nothin'," he declared fearfully.

"Boss, you give me one hour an' he'll talk all right," Wash said eagerly.

"Maybe he'll talk anyway when he has time tuh think it over," Joe said grimly. "I'm goin' out tuh see if I can't persuade somebody else tuh do a little talkin'. I don't want yuh tuh offer him any violence, understand, till I come back."

Joe knew that the man would be safe, but Bunder did not. The fellow was almost ready to crack and tell everything that he knew. Joe felt sure that he would break completely when he returned.

Half an hour later, mounted upon Bunder's horse, and with Bunder's rifle under his knee, and the young Indian's six-gun at his hip, Joe Kidder set out upon the trail which Jim Rarick had recently travelled.

XVI

A HANDY WOODPILE

BETWEEN Bunder's homestead and Rarick's ranch on Tumbling Creek was a high, table-like ridge with a gradual ascent from the Bunder side, and almost perpendicular from the other. In just one place was it broken enough to make a horse trail possible down to the creek. This was the route usually used between the two places, for the wagon road by way of the mouth of the canyon was at least twice as far.

At the head of this steep draw down to the canyon Joe paused. If he should happen to be discovered down below his best chance to avoid capture would be to take to the brush. Rarick's ranch was the highest one up the creek, and in consequence there would be several miles of brush in which he could manage to hide out for a short time, though the canyon from there up was nowhere more than half a mile wide. It was not more than that distance down to Rarick's house, and finally Joe led the horse to one side and tied it to a service bush. The remainder of the distance he made on foot.

It was now dark enough for him to make his approach without danger of detection. With the true stockman's instinct he headed first of all for the stable. He came up from the rear and gained the cover of the stub of a last year's hay stack. For ten minutes he lay in the shadows, but heard nothing except the steady munching of a horse eating hay. At last he ventured to raise a hay window and crawl inside. He had ascertained clearly that there was but one night horse being kept up, but he did not intend to make the mistake that he hoped Rarick had made. He meant to find out by the number of saddles how many men were around. After feeling around a bit he ventured to strike a match, and as it flared up there seemed to be saddles in every direction. He saw saddles hanging from pegs on the walls; saddles thrown over the mangers; saddles on the grain box, and saddles strewn around on the floor.

Joe extinguished the light swiftly, and it was a minute or so before he dared to breathe. Then he realized that the stable was of no immediate interest to the men who were staying at the ranch even though it was to him; but he wasted no time getting back out in the open.

He understood readily that a group of the men who were out hunting him and Wash White had gathered to spend the night. Rarick's visit to Bunder's place indicated that it was a private posse

raised by Rarick. He had come with the hope of being able to get his hands on the breed, Comanche Charley, and he did not mean to beat a retreat until he tried to find out something of the plans of his enemies, dangerous though it promised to be.

He was disappointed to begin with, because with strangers present it was a certainty that no important range history would be revealed.

He began to move slowly toward the house, crawling along on his hands and knees, but not on a direct course between the house and barn. He had progressed half way when he heard two horses coming in from the main road. Two late man hunters, he thought bitterly. New arrivals meant people going to and from the barn. There would be smokes lighted probably, and there might even be lanterns. It was no place for him to be, and yet there might be things said outside which he certainly would not be able to overhear if uttered indoors. He looked about hastily, and the only shelter he could see was a pile of dry poles that had been piled up to be later cut into stove wood. There were about three loads of it, Joe judged, and the big end of the pile seemed to be in very deep shadows. He got up and moved hastily over to it, and was alarmed to find that the shadows were not so deep as he had thought. Indeed, he felt himself terribly exposed, but there was no time to do more than crawl around to one side of the pile and stretch out at full length beside the

poles before the horsemen neared his hiding place.

Contrary to his expectations the riders stopped directly in front of the house—it was entirely innocent of any yard fence—instead of going on to the stable yard to dispose of their horses.

"Ain't yuh gonna come in?" he heard in a boy's shrill treble.

He did not understand the answer, but it was a softly feminine voice that sent a wild thrill through him. Only Vivian Jackson could speak like that.

They continued to talk, and Joe gathered that the girl was bidding the boy to tell his father to come out. Presently Dutch went in the house, and for one insane moment Joe was minded to rush out and speak to the girl. Reason prevailed and he snuggled hard against the poles.

It was but a minute or so after the boy disappeared until the door opened, and by the shaft of light Joe made out the trim, alert figure of Jim Rarick. Dutch followed him out, and then the door closed.

"Why, hello, Vivian," Rarick said in his softly modulated voice. "I wasn't lookin' for you to join our posse."

"I want to speak to you alone, Jim," the girl said.

"Well, we're alone, except for Dutch here, an' he don't count. I can git rid of him easy enough." Was there a jeering note in the man's voice? Joe's fists tightened as he thought there was. A moment

later it appeared that the girl herself was of the same mind.

"I've asked Dutch to stay out here with me," she said.

"Feel safer with the son than yuh do with the father?" Rarick asked.

"Much," Vivian retorted shortly.

The girl had been slowly moving her horse away from the house and over toward the wood pile.

"Where yuh gittin' to, Viv? Why don't yuh come in an' meet the boys," Rarick objected.

"I don't want to meet them," the girl said. "That's why I don't want to be too close to the house."

Joe wondered if they were going to approach his side of the wood pile and force him to disclose himself. Since he had heard the fellow use the diminutive of the girl's name he did not much care. However, the girl stopped her horse about twenty feet from the end of the wood pile.

"What did yuh want tuh see me about, Viv?" Rarick asked.

"Are you joining this man hunt for Joe Kidder?" she asked directly.

"Not exactly joinin' it," the man said drily. "I'm organizin' a little posse of my own. Kidder has been fool enough tuh come back here an' I mean tuh grab him."

"Jim, you mustn't do that. If you find Joe you

must help him get away." Her tones were pleading.

"Me? Help that skunk git away? I think not," Rarick laughed harshly. "I owe that bird scores that he'll never be able tuh pay."

"Surely, Jim, you are capable of being a generous foe."

"Why're you so cussed interested in him?" the man demanded sharply. "He's a thief an' a killer, an' tuh cap the climax he pals up with a nigger killer o' the lowest type."

"I never did believe he was guilty of that murder, and I won't believe it now," she said firmly.

"I'd like tuh know how much evidence you'd have to have?" Rarick almost snarled.

"But, Jim, nobody saw him shoot those Indians, remember."

"What of it? He fought with 'em, an' they were found dead where he was ridin', an' he had the motive for killin' 'em."

"There's one thing about it that's always worried me, Jim," Vivian said. "Everybody says Joe quarreled with the Indians, and knocked one of them off his horse. Yet the Indians lived to tell about it. If he wanted to kill them why didn't he do it then?"

"Because he thought he had 'em bluffed," Rarick said readily. "I saw the Injuns myself—in fact I gave them cartridges tuh fill their guns. When Kidder saw 'em comin' back meanin' business he killed 'em."

"Were you on the mountain that day yourself?" the girl asked.

"Sure I was. That's where I met the Injuns," the man replied readily. "I'd been over on my own range tuh see how the snow was, an' was on my way home when I met the Injun policemen."

"Then you were probably the last man to see them alive," Vivian said.

"I guess I was," Rarick admitted.

"Then you may have a reason for trying so hard to convict Joe Kidder," the girl shot out. "Otherwise, they might suspect you."

To Joe's surprise the fellow laughed easily. "If that's what you're worryin' about git it off yore mind. Me an' Comanche Charley was back here at the ranch long before sun-down. I can prove that by Dutch."

"They shore was," the boy spoke up. Joe Kidder believed them both to be lying, but it seemed to satisfy the girl.

"Just the same, Jim, if you should happen to locate Joe won't you please help him get away?" she begged.

"Why are you so damned interested in that feller?" Rarick demanded jealously. "Yuh've been playin' me along fer a quite a while. Are yuh stuck on him, an 'tryin' tuh work me tuh help him?"

"That is an insult," the girl said hotly.

"Yuh're in no position tuh git high an' mighty

with me, girlie," Rarick said in a dangerously ominous tone. "There's a dozen men in the house, an' it might be a bit compromisin' if they knew you had rode over here tuh see me this time o' night. Yuh're purty helpless right now, an', by Gawd, if I thought yuh was in love with that damn Kidder I'd——"

He had moved close to the girl, and one hand was on her bridle reins. Joe Kidder had tensed himself to spring out, regardless of the almost certain fatal consequences to himself, when there came an unexpected interruption from another source. Most surprisingly it was from Dutch Rarick.

"Cut that out, Dad," the boy shot out. "I brung Miss Jackson here, an' I mean tuh look after her."

"You git tuh hell away from here before I knock yore block off," Rarick rasped angrily.

"I won't do it," the boy returned toughly.

"I suppose I'd just as well be going," the girl broke in. "I thought you were quite a man, Jim, but I see you're utterly without feeling like the rest of them."

"Not where yuh're concerned, Viv," the man said eagerly. "There's just one thing would make me let Kidder go if I land him—an' that is you."

"You will, then?" she asked eagerly.

"If yuh meet the condition," he bargained shrewdly.

"I—I—don't know," Vivian said. "Of course

Kidder is nothing to me, but I—I don't believe he's guilty. Nothing can make me think that. I'd do most anything to help him."

"You do think a lot of me though, don't yuh?" Rarick wheedled.

"Yes, I suppose I do," the girl said reluctantly. "If I could only be sure of you I might think more of you; but frankly, Jim, there's always something about you that I can't quite trust."

"Well, tuh show yuh I'm all right I'll do my best tuh help Kidder if he comes my way," Rarick promised.

"Thank you, Jim," the girl said fervently. "Good night."

"Wait, I'll go back with yuh," Dutch offered.

"No, Dutch, I'd rather go alone," Vivian said. "You know I'm not afraid." She rode away, and the father and son were left alone.

"You damned little whelp, I've a notion tuh take yore hide off with a quirt," Rarick said savagely. "What the hell do you mean hangin' around when I tell yuh tuh leave?"

"I reckon I know what yuh'd try tuh do tuh Miss Jackson if yuh was left alone with her," the boy said stolidly.

"By Gawd, I will skin you," Rarick said threateningly.

"No, yuh won't," the boy shot out. "I won't squeal about nothin' as long as yuh leave Vivian

Jackson alone, but if yuh bother her, or try lickin' me I shore will. An' I can tell a lot besides who killed them Injuns if I want to."

"Yuh've been eavesdroppin', damn yuh," snarled his father.

"Yep," the boy admitted. "I know who killed Vick Yoakes."

A sound of incoherent rage, more like a hiss than anything else, came from Jim Rarick.

"Yuh orta had Bunder an' Fullmer kill him, too," the boy said inexorably.

"If yuh ever breathe a word like that again I'll kill yuh, if yuh are my own flesh an' blood," Rarick panted hoarsely.

"All right. But no more lickin's, an' you treat Vivian Jackson like she was a lady," the boy threatened.

"If I'd known yuh was gonna git daffy over a teacher I'd shore never sent yuh back tuh school," Rarick rasped, and then strode rapidly toward the house.

It was half an hour before the boy went away, for he seated himself on the wood pile within ten feet of Joe. The latter feared that the sound of his breathing would carry to the boy's keen ears, but apparently the boy was brooding too deeply upon troubles of his own to think of other things.

Joe was frantic to get away. Vivian Jackson's expressed confidence in his innocence had acted like

a tonic to his dispirited soul. He had felt that his escape from prison would utterly damn him in the eyes of everybody, and to find that she still had faith in him had revived his faith in himself.

Then Dutch Rarick's startling declaration to his father had suddenly placed in Joe's hands a possible way to clear himself, and bring at least some of his enemies to justice in a single swoop. He could hardly wait to get back to where Bill Bunder was, and make him talk. He had not for one moment suspected Bunder of being one of the murderers of the Indian police, but Dutch Rarick's remark was certainly a strong intimation that he was.

At the same time Joe was torn by a desire to come to grips with Jim Rarick. The man's attitude toward Vivian Jackson infuriated him, but now he had an even worse grievance than that. If words meant anything at all it was Jim Rarick himself who had murdered Vick Yoakes. He remembered Rarick's promise to Vivian to help him if he got the chance, and it brought a cynical smile. When he and Rarick met again they were not going to help each other.

Dutch had no more than arisen from the wood pile when another horseman appeared in sight, and still Joe did not dare to move. He could not see the boy, but he knew that he was still standing just the other side of the wood pile, when he heard the new arrival address him. But it was not the boy who

concerned Joe after he heard the rider speak, for the newcomer was Comanche Charley, the man he had originally come to seek.

Joe realized that he had been exceptionally lucky thus far in being at the one place in the whole country where he could hear anything that would help him. If only that luck would hold out a trifle longer he meant to take Comanche Charley with him when he went back to Bunder's.

XVII

COMANCHE CHARLEY WIELDS HIS KNIFE

HEY you, Dutch, put my horse up," the half breed had said when he rode up.

"You go tuh hell," Dutch Rarick returned promptly. "I'm not hired tuh wait on you."

"If you was mine, yuh little rat, I'd skin yuh alive," the breed snarled. "I've been ridin' hard all day, an' I gathered a hundred an' fifty Indians tuh hunt this man Kidder that yore dad wants so bad, an' you won't even feed my horse."

"That don't concern me," the boy said indifferently, and Joe presently risked a glance around the end of the poles, and saw him just entering the house. Comanche Charley, breathing curses, was leading his horse toward the stables.

Joe was once more in motion, very much to his relief. As soon as the breed was half way to the stable Joe darted swiftly across his trail, and gained the shelter of the log building without being seen. A moment later he stepped around the corner. Comanche Charley had just grabbed the latigo preparatory to unfastening the cinch-hook when Joe spoke.

"Yuh needn't bother about that just now, because yuh've got some more use for yore horse," Joe said quietly.

Comanche Charley gave a convulsive start and looked back over his shoulder. There was enough starlight to let him glimpse the gun in the hand of the speaker. He recognized Joe instantly and he chilled to his toes. He revolved slowly until he faced Joe, and he was careful to keep his hands where Joe could see them.

Comanche Charley had always been afraid of Kidder, and except for the one time when he had used a knife upon him he had contrived to keep out of his way. That had been when Joe was trying to be peaceable. But Joe Kidder the outlaw, the man fighting for his life against hopeless odds was a formidable figure indeed to face alone. And Joe's quiet, implacable tones had told him well enough that the slightest resistance would be fatal.

"Yore judgment is the only thing I ever saw about you to approve of," Joe said evenly. "The first out o' the way sound or move woulda cost yuh yore worthless life."

Comanche Charley was consumed with inward rage. Two hundred feet away was a crowd of men who would have been only too glad to take a hand, yet he dared not summon them.

And the breed was indeed dealing with a desperate man. Joe had been goaded by successive

wrongs into throwing off all restraint. He knew that if he stood any chance at all to win his good name back, or to even discomfit his enemies that he must do daring things, and gamble his life without a moment's hesitation. He was prepared fully to do that.

"I want yore gun and yore knife," Joe said calmly, "an' I want 'em quick. If anybody opens that door yonder I'll shoot you an' take yore horse, so don't hesitate." With his gun pressed into the breed's stomach he used his free hand to jerk the fellow's gun from the holster. Then he stood back and made the man hand over his long bladed knife, handle first.

Joe stuck the knife inside his own waist-band, and retained the gun in his other hand. "Now climb back on yore horse an' ride on a walk along the trail tuh Bill Bunder's place. I'll be right behind you, an' I'm not a bad shot," he said.

In three minutes from the time Joe had caught the fellow they were leaving the Rarick ranch. Joe did not breathe easy until they were out of sight of the house. He wondered what would happen when the breed did not show up in the house. There was a bare chance that Dutch would not mention his arrival, but Joe could not count on that. The breed was known to be temperamental, and they might decide that he had suddenly decided to go elsewhere to spend the night. Joe counted upon that, but he

knew, too, that before many hours somebody would grow curious over the absence of both him and Bill Bunder.

By the time they reached the top of the ridge Joe was out of wind, and he had to call on his prisoner to slow his horse several times. It was with a grateful sigh of relief that he got upon Bunder's horse.

"Now I reckon we can talk a little," he remarked almost cheerfully.

Comanche Charley made no reply; he had spoken no word since the encounter.

"Tuh cut things short," Joe said, "I broke out of jail especially tuh find you. I wanted tuh make yuh confess tuh killin' them Injun policemen. Tonight I've learned that yuh didn't do it after all. I'm a heap disappointed."

For the first time Comanche Charley 's eyes rested directly upon Joe's face. He was puzzled, but not yet ready to speak.

"But now that I know it was Bill Bunder an' Sam Fullmer who killed the Injuns, an' Jim Rarick who killed Vick Yoakes I'm givin' you a chance tuh clear yoreself as much as possible, because when it comes out they're gonna try tuh blame it all on you because youh're a half breed an' ain't got any real friends," Joe went on quietly.

At last Joe had made an impression upon the breed's taciturnity. "How did you find that out?" he asked huskily.

"It wasn't any little bird," Joe said grimly. "I'm goin' tuh surrender to the officers purty soon, an' I mean tuh take you an' Bill Bunder with me. Bunder is goin' tuh blame it on you if he can, an' if I keep still he can do that very thing. The only thing that'll make me clear you of that murder is for you to come clean with everything you know."

"How do yuh know yuh'll git Bunder?" Comanche asked.

"I've already got him."

"He's—confessed?"

"He will."

"I can tell you nothing," the breed shrugged suddenly. "I've killed nobody."

"Who suggested that you git that lease?"

"I did. I saw a chance tuh git some money outa these damn cattlemen an' I took it."

"Then who suggested that you keep me off?" There was an interval of silence.

"Yuh got more for that than yuh did for the cattle, didn't yuh? Who paid it?" Joe snapped.

"Tony King," the breed said sulkily.

"An' did King hire you to kill those Indians, or have somebody else do it?" Joe persisted.

"Yes, by Gawd, he did," the breed shot out. "When I refused tuh do it he got Bunder an' Fullmer."

"Yuh'll swear tuh that?"

"Yes."

Joe was thinking rapidly. He had to make Bunder confess the killing. When that was done he could take the two men down to the settlement and give himself up. It would be a dirty trick to give Wash White up, but he hardly knew how to avoid it. He had wanted to settle with Tony King and Jim Rarick as man to man, but he would have to let that pass and let the law deal with them. But everything depended upon getting Bunder and Comanche Charley to incriminate each other in such a way that they would not go back on their testimony.

At Bunder's place they stopped long enough to put the horses in the stable, and then Joe herded his prisoner into the house. Bill Bunder was already in a bad state of nerves because of his confinement with Wash White, but he grew positively pasty as he saw Joe march Comanche Charley into the room.

"There seems to be a little dispute to clear up between you two," Joe said without ceremony. "Bill, Comanche here says it was you an' Fullmer who murdered the Indians."

Bunder's dull face was distorted by fear, or anger.

"If he—says that—he lies," he ground out.

Joe intercepted a wink from the breed to Bunder.

"As a matter of fact," Joe said, "I've got evidence by a better witness than either of you. Bunder an' Fullmer did the killing, but you, Co-

manche, told them to do it. You met those Indians, an' they told you about the fuss I had had with them. You doubled back then an' ordered Fullmer an' Bunder tuh lay for 'em, an' you went on with Rarick."

"It's a lie," the half breed hissed. "I had nothin' tuh do with it."

"It's the truth," Bill Bunder jerked out. "He can't sneak out of it. Me an' Sam didn't wanta do it, but they had the goods on us so we had to."

Comanche Charley suddenly leaped toward the rancher, his face horribly distorted with rage. "You fool," he yelled. "Keep yore damn mouth shut."

Joe made a sign for Wash to let them alone, and the two rolled on the floor, fighting like wild cats. The place was nearly a wreck before Bunder finally got astride his man and held him helpless. He would have beaten him into insensibility if Joe had not interfered then.

"Don't yuh see, Bill, that yore only chance is tuh come clean," Joe said firmly. "Rarick an' this bird have used you for a tool, just like Tony King has used them."

"All right, by Gawd, I will tell," Bunder declared. "This damn"——

Comanche Charley had got to his feet, and staggered against Joe. Suddenly his hand flashed to the hilt of his own knife that was protruding from Joe's belt. With a speed that was simply bewilder-

ing he whirled and drove the knife into Bill Bunder's breast clear up to the hilt.

A look of dreadful amazement appeared upon Bunder's face as he started to slump to the floor. Then Comanche Charley swept the lamp off the table, and the cabin was plunged in darkness.

Joe reached out hoping to touch the half-breed, but the fellow was too elusive. "The door! Watch the door," Joe yelled at Wash. The next moment he collided with someone and clinched. The tremendous strength with which he was clasped let him know instantly it was Wash he had grappled with, but before he could make the negro understand and could get loose he heard the door slam.

With two strides Joe was outside, drawing out his gun as he ran. He looked first toward the stable, but the breed had realized that he would not have time to get a horse out of the stable. By the time Joe located him the fellow was tearing in through the brush like a frightened rabbit.

Joe emptied both guns at the dim figure of the running man, but the fellow was scarcely visible, and he knew that it would be sheer luck if one of the bullets hit the mark.

"After him, Wash," he urged, when the guns were empty, but after a half hour's chase they lost track of the half breed altogether.

Bitterly disappointed, and condemning himself for his carelessness in letting the fellow get a hold

of the knife, Joe returned to the cabin and lighted the now chimneyless lamp. By its flickering blaze he saw that Bill Bunder was dying. With Wash's help they lifted the man onto the bed.

"I'm sorry it happened, Bill," Joe said. "Is there anything yuh want tuh say?"

"All—I—kin say—is—is that Comanche Charley did tell us tuh kill them—Injuns. We—we—had tuh do it. Rarick"——

The blood suddenly rushed into the man's throat, choking him. When the paroxysm subsided he was dead.

With a feeling of bitter disappointment Joe realized that he had had victory within his grasp, and had let it slip through his fingers through a moment of carelessness. It was foolish to think of pursuing the wily half breed in the darkness. Soon the fellow would make his way to some ranch and the news would spread like wildfire that the hunted men were in Bill Bunder's cabin. The man hunt would be on with the blood lust at fever heat, for Comanche Charley could be depended upon to say that they had murdered Bill Bunder.

Suddenly Joe's teeth came together with a click. He still had a few hours of liberty left to him, and he resolved that those hours would not be wasted. Even though he had lost a trick he had found out a few things, particularily who had killed the two Indians. He knew now that Bunder and Fullmer,

the real killers, were but tools in the hands of Comanche Charley; the half breed, in turn, he believed to be dominated by Jim Rarick; and now he was convinced that back of Rarick loomed the form of old Tony King.

If he had had any idea where he could find Sam Fullmer he would have gone after him, though he knew the fellow was made of sterner stuff than Bill Bunder. But Fullmer might be any one of a dozen places, and was probably with some party that was watching for the fugitives. It would not do to hunt for him. Therefore, if he could not begin at the bottom he determined that he would try to start at the top.

"We can't stay here, Wash," he stated. "I'll tell you something, though, that I should have told you before. I've had no hope whatever of escaping. More than likely I'll be killed, an' if I ain't I mean to give myself up sooner or later anyway. So the best thing for you to do is to give yourself up as quick as possible. I learned to-night that there's a hundred and fifty Indians lookin' for us, an' probably there'll be that many white men. If we make any resistance whatever we'll be killed. I'm afraid they'd hang you unless you surrender to an officer, but I think I can direct you to a place where they'll slip you through the line and safely into jail."

"Boss, Ah knows all I want ter know 'bout dem

mobs, an' I don't figgah ter be tooken by dem. But eben iffen Ah was Ah 'tends ter stay right by yo, boss. Yo'-all is a sho' nuff man, an' Ah's plumb willin' ter take pot luck wid yo'," Wash declared.

Joe was really affected by the negro's loyalty, and he knew that Wash was not altogether actuated by selfish motives. Even though the negro perhaps feared to cut loose alone he believed that Wash was sincere in his declaration that he meant to stick no matter what the consequences.

They mounted the two horses in the stable and used them to run in the two Indian ponies. These were both up on their mettle, and Joe knew that before it was over they might need fresh horses.

A few minutes later the night stillness was broken by the clopetty-clop of their horses' galloping feet.

They were headed for Tony King's ranch.

XVIII

"AIN'T YORE GUN LOADED?"

TONY KING'S ranch was situated out on the broad Portneuf meadows, about six miles from Bill Bunder's place. The buildings reared up grim and ghostly in the moonlight as Joe and the negro threaded their way along the high levees in the water-soaked meadows. At that time of the year to get off the levees might mean to mire a horse.

Joe guessed it to be considerably past midnight when they reached the edge of the gentle knoll on which the buildings stood. King had a big ranch, and employed quite a crew of men. Joe had visited there often during the days when he was on friendly terms with the rancher, and he knew that King, who was a crusty old bachelor, with no living relative upon earth so far as he knew, occupied the house alone. Even the cook, an old time cowpuncher, slept in the bunkhouse with the other men.

There was a chance that King might be entertaining some officers out looking for the fugitives,

and an equal chance that King himself might be out on the range where Joe might be expected to show himself, but that was a chance which had to be faced.

They rode their horses almost up to the door and Joe got off and knocked. It was several minutes before he got a response, and then he heard the well remembered voice of old Tony himself grumbingly wanting to know what was required.

"Is there an officer here?" Joe asked in as husky a tone as he could command.

"Off'cer? No. Who wants a off'cer?" King's tones were still cloudy from sleep.

Joe decided that it would be best to wait for King to come to the door, and not again risk the man recognizing his voice.

He had not long to wait. The door was thrown open, and old Tony's gray-bearded face appeared. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded crankily.

Joe had stepped to one side, but as the door opened he stepped swiftly forward and thrust one foot in the doorway. At the same moment the muzzle of his gun was pressed hard against Tony's undershirt.

King emitted a gasp of recognition, but he thought and acted fast. One lean hand shot out and grabbed Joe's wrist, thrusting the gun away; while with the other he attempted to slam the door. His obvious intention was to fasten Joe's arm in

the door, and he showed a reckless disregard of his own life in attempting it.

Joe himself was not caught unaware. His other hand seized King's lean wrist in a grasp of steel, and his foot prevented the door from catching him. Two hands were stronger than one and the muzzle of the gun swung back against the older man's ribs.

"I don't want tuh shoot yuh—yet, Tony, but if yuh don't quit fussin' I'll have to," Joe whispered.

"An' if yuh do there's a bunkhouse full o' men who'll riddle yore carcass 'fore yuh kin git away," King panted back, while they were still struggling.

"An' those same men will run into more lead than they ever seen before if they wake up," Joe said.

King had been forced back inside the house, and abruptly he ceased to fight. He was held powerless anyway. He was breathing hard, and in his bare feet and underclothes, with his hair standing on end he was not a formidable figure.

"Yuh figgerin' on murderin' me like yuh did the Injuns?" King asked.

"I didn't kill them, so it won't be exactly similar," Joe said.

King was angry, and a bit frightened even though he was a man of intrinsic courage. He had sensed from the first moment that it was no light thing that had brought Joe Kidder to his house, and he had known instinctively that any effort on his part

to rouse his men would have brought about his own death. He had seen men shot in the stomach, and heard their yells of frenzied agony. It muffled his lips.

"What do you want o' me, yuh calf thief?" he demanded insultingly.

"I hardly know myself yet, but I mean tuh find out," Joe said. "It won't do you any good tuh call me names either."

Joe motioned to Wash, and a moment later the big negro stood grinning before them. "Take the horses around the corner and then come back here an' stay in this door," Joe ordered. "If you hear anything out of the way, or anybody shows up from the direction of the bunkhouse let me know."

"Ah got yo' boss, an' Ah's all ready ter use dis heah li'l lead sprinkler any time anybody shoves dey haid up," Wash assured.

"Now, King, we're goin' in tuh yore bedroom an' have a real nice visit," Joe said sardonically backing his man into the room where King had been asleep, and where a coal oil lamp burned fitfully upon the top of a bureau. King sat down upon the bed, and Joe took a chair directly in front of him, calm and determined.

"Gimme a chance tuh dress, will yuh, damn yuh?" old Tony choked out furiously.

"Mebbe yuh'll never need tuh dress again, Tony," Joe said softly. "It all depends on how we come

out with this talk. Yuh can pull the blankets over yore laigs tuh keep yuh warm."

With an angry jerk King pulled the covers over his rather skinny old legs. "I reckon yuh'll murder me all right—a man who'd shoot from ambush would do anything—but yuh'll never make me take water," he declared defiantly.

"There'll be no use o' yuh springin' that old gag about killin' the Injuns," Joe said, as he leaned forward in his chair, his gun on his knee. "I've found out to-night who did kill 'em, an' incidentally who killed Vick Yoakes. You an' me can git right down tuh facts now."

"Why don't yuh?" Tony demanded succinctly and sarcastically.

"We will," Joe retorted just as crisply. "I never thought to be settin' in front of a man knowin' in my heart that in just a few minutes I was goin' tuh kill him, much less would I o' thought a few years ago that that man would be you who I then thought was my best friend."

"Why don't yuh git tuh work?" old Tony asked witheringly. "Ain't yore gun loaded?"

"You just take a chance if yuh think it ain't," Joe invited. "Now listen! To-night Bill Bunder confessed to me that it was him an' Sam Fullmer who killed those Indians"——

"What?" old Tony screeched.

"Of course it surprises yuh—that he'd confess,"

Joe rasped. "His confession was corroborated by Comanche Charley though when Bill said it was Comanche who had brought him the orders tuh do it Comanche pulled a quick trick an' killed Bunder with his knife. That, o' course explains why I'm here. I might overlook yuh stealin' my cattle, an' even havin' the Injun police murdered in order tuh have me hung, but when yuh had Jim Rarick murder Vick Yoakes yuh went too far."

"Go on," Tony King said in a strangely husky voice.

"Since my time is purty limited I figger there's only one way tuh even the score on Vick's account. Yuh're the man who's his real murderer an' I've come here for no other purpose than tuh git you before I try to git Rarick. If yuh're willin' tuh come clean with the whole rotten business from the time yuh marked that dogy calf we'll surrender together. If not"——

"Yuh've knowed me fer better'n eight years," Tony King said slowly. "Do yuh think if what yo're sayin' is true that I'd stir a step with yuh?"

"Frankly I don't, Tony, so we'd just as well git it over with," Joe said. "I don't know how I was ever fooled so bad by a man as I was by you. I can understand the trick yuh played by brandin' all our cattle with that combination brand, but I didn't think yuh'd resort tuh murder."

An angry flush swept over Tony King's bronzed

features. "I can stand yore killin' me, but by Gawd I can't stand many more o' yore lies," he grated.

"Do yuh think I'd bother tuh lie to a man I mean tuh kill?" Joe demanded. "I ain't foolin' myself none. If I don't git killed in the next twenty four hours I'll hang, but I've promised myself a settlement with you."

He suddenly produced the second gun he had carried from Bill Bunder's cabin and laid it on the foot of the bed. "Yuh deserve tuh be shot down the way those other fellows were, but it ain't in me tuh do it that way. I'm goin' tuh call Wash White an' have him count three. Yuh'll be standin' in one end o' the' room an' me in the other. It'll be an even break," he said.

Old Tony reached out and picked up the gun, but he was careful not to point it anywhere near Kidder. "Yuh ain't bluffin'," he commented. "Lemme think a minute, will yuh?"

"There's no great hurry," Joe said, though in his heart he knew that King would face death before he would weaken or humiliate himself. In view of what the man had done Joe was determined to make him atone, but he wanted it over with. Still, he was determined to be square. Rushing a man into eternity was no light matter.

"I wonder if it's possible that yuh believe what yuh've been sayin'?" King said slowly, almost as though he was talking to himself.

"You should know," Joe retorted. "If we had the time I'd take yuh over an 'let yuh see Bill Bunder's body."

"I've suspected yuh o' everything else, but I never figgered yuh tuh be a liar," King said at last. "Suppose we talk it over? When yuh told me that if the Injuns tried tuh move yuh off the mountain they'd be sorry I figgered there'd likely be a killin'. So when they was found dead, an' I heard yuh'd already had one ruckus with 'em I never doubted it was you. But if Bunder did confess I kin see"——

He stopped and seemed to reflect, and Joe gazed at him with a singular eagerness.

"Tony, I wish tuh Gawd yuh could prove that I was mistaken, but that silver cow, the lease tuh bankrupt me, the misbrandin' o' the cattle—no, the evidence is too strong."

Each man seemed absorbed in his own train of thought, and was oblivious of the other.

"Both Rarick an' Comanche Charley hated you worse than poison, I know that," old Tony went on. "I knew that neither one of 'em coulda killed the Injuns, but they mighta had Bunder an' Fullmer—I hadn't thought o' that. It was their chance tuh git revenge on yuh. I wonder if it coulda been on their mind when they suggested that they wouldn't let you on the lease if I'd slip 'em a thousand dollars?"

"You did that, did yuh?" Joe demanded bitterly.

"You was brandin' my calves an' I had tuh break yuh some way, or go broke myself," Tony said with equal bitterness.

"You damn fool, I never stole yore calves," Joe said hotly.

"How come nobody ever branded that coin marked calf if it wasn't you?" old Tony demanded with equal heat.

Joe's hand tightened upon the handle of his gun, and then his sense of humor came to his rescue. Here they were, two men who were about to try to kill each other, flying into childish passion over an incident that was over two years old. For that dogy calf was surely poisoning both their minds to such an extent that both were in danger of forgetting what they had been trying to figure out.

"That damned calf, or cow, has caused us trouble enough without draggin' her in now," Joe said. "Mebbe if yuh'd a voiced them suspicions yuh say yuh had when the silver cow was a calf a lotta trouble could ha' been avoided. I never cared a damn about the thing—never thought of her, in fact, until I found people were accusin' me o' theft. But if yuh got anything tuh say about them murders out with it."

"Well, all I got tuh say about that is I never had nothin' tuh do with it," Tony said. "When Rarick an' Comanche Charley offered tuh sub-lease me that

ground, an' agreed tuh keep you off for a thousand dollars I paid it, an' I was tickled pink when I seen yuh in trouble. But if I had any men tuh kill I'd do the job myself."

Joe looked at the old range veteran searchingly. His manner bore the imprint of truth. Abruptly he got to his feet. "I guess that lets you out," he said. "I can't kill yuh just for tryin' tuh break me or steal my cattle, so I reckon I'll see what I can do about Jim Rarick."

"Why, yuh damn fool, Rarick is raisin' a big posse tuh hunt yuh, an' it'll just be suicide tuh go after him," old Tony protested.

"Still, I'm runnin' this thing down, an' I know Jim Rarick killed Vick because I overheard his own son charge him with it, and Rarick didn't deny it. I've got nothin' tuh lose any way," Joe said. "Let me advise yuh that it won't be healthy if yuh try follerin' us." He started toward the door, but Tony King called out sharply:

"Wait!"

Joe turned about and stared at the man on the bed.

"Kin you look me in the eye an' say yuh never stole my calves," King probed.

"My God, why be dense?" Joe said irritably. "Of course I never stole a damn critter o' yours—or anybody else's." He was struck by a sudden thought. "Can you say as much about mine?"

"Dammit, I quit stealin' cattle twenty years ago, an' I ain't never been accused o' bein' childish," King snarled.

"What about that combination brand?" Joe demanded.

"Yore men"—— old Tony began. Suddenly he threw the blankets away from his warped old legs and sprang to his feet. "Joe Kidder, is it possible that we been misjudgin' each other all this time?"

"You miserable old pelican, if yuh'd never marked that damn calf yuh'd a saved yoreself a half a dollar an' my life, but I reckon yuh kin git yore half dollar back," Joe said with a grim smile.

"An' by Gawd, Joe Kidder, I mean tuh save yore life," old Tony roared. "Where the hell's my boots?"

XIX

"I'LL BRING 'EM OR KILL 'EM"

JOE'S brain was beginning to whirl, so rapidly had the situation changed. He had come there intending to kill Tony King if he could, but instead of that the man seemed to have suddenly become his ally. Now Joe was principally conscious of a vast relief that he had not been compelled to do the thing he had come to do. He had liked Tony King, and to his amazement he was finding that he still liked him.

With characteristic impetuosity old Tony had veered clear around in his views. He talked as he drew on his clothes.

"Whether you stole my calves or not, an' now I'm thinkin' it mighta been somebody else, I'm plumb convinced yuh never murdered nobody. But how the hell are we goin' tuh prove it?"

"If we could git a hold o' Sam Fullmer we might make him talk," Joe suggested.

"Not him," Tony denied. "He's too sulky by nature. I'd sooner take a chance on that half breed."

"If the breed did tell the truth now he'd lay himself open tuh conviction for killin' Bill Bunder," Joe said. "My opinion is he'll never confess."

"An' Jim Rarick won't," Tony said gloomily.

"It looks purty black for me," Joe admitted. "Findin' out it wasn't you back of it don't prove nothin' on anybody else."

By this time old Tony was fully dressed. "First thing we got tuh figger on is hidin' you," he said. "The only safe place I know fer yuh is right here. Yuh don't reckon they kin track yuh here, do yuh?"

"I couldn't say. If they struck our tracks on the levee they might," Joe said.

"I'll fix that," Tony promised. "I'll have a bunch o' loose horses drove over it first thing in the mornin'."

"See here, Tony, I don't want tuh git you into any more trouble," Joe said. "This is my fight an' nobody else's, an' "——

"The hell it is," Tony thundered. "If yo're innocent then somebody else must be guilty, an' I mean tuh find out. Now you camp right here, while I ride over tuh Rarick's an' see what's up over there."

For a moment Joe wondered if he had been too gullible, and if this was not merely a clever trick of King's to bring about his downfall. But when he looked at the old cattleman he could not help having faith in him.

"Don't be fool enough to go over there an' make a lot of accusations that yuh can't prove," he said.

"Think I ain't got no sense?" Tony snorted. "I'll play right into their hands—fer a while. Then, when the time comes I'll invite Rarick an' that damned half breed down here on some pretext. Then we'll all have a nice li'l talk."

Joe's brain was beginning to throb. "D'ye reckon yuh could git 'em here?" he asked eagerly.

"I'll bring 'em, or kill 'em," Tony promised.

The first thing they had to do, however, was to make certain Joe would not be discovered. When old Tony got a clear view of Wash White for the first time his enthusiasm appeared to wane.

"This the best thing yuh could find tuh travel with?" he asked Joe.

"We broke jail together, an' I reckon we stick it through tuh the finish," Joe said.

"Well, I'll call in Pete Morton, my cook, an' make arrangements fer him tuh tend tuh all yore wants," Tony said. "He's the only man I got I can trust tuh the limit."

He went out to the bunkhouse and Joe and the negro were left alone in the house. Wash was plainly puzzled at the course of events.

"Boss, does I unnerstan' dat yo' am innercent o' dem murders yo'-all is charged wid?" he asked.

"Absolutley, Wash."

"Well, boss, Ah ain't," Wash sighed. "Dat gal

ob mine she 'peared ter be pow'ful fond ob me. Ah was at wuk puttin' up ice from de ribber, an gittin' eight dollahs a day. All dat money Ah gib ter my gal. All of a suddint one day we run out ob sawdust an' Ah come home. Ah could heah somebuddy laffin' an' talkin' back in de kitchen, an' den Ah heahs dat gal an' a big, black niggah man a gloatin' oveh dem eight dollahs a day dey was livin' easy on, an' promisin' each oddah ter fly away when de ice job petered out in de spring. Boss, Ah jes' nat'rally went ter carvin'. De on'y reason Ah didn't desec' dat niggah man was becuz he went out t'roo de winder when Ah opened de do'."

"They played yuh a low-down trick," Joe admitted.

"But de p'int is, boss: us ain't in de same class no moh," Wash pointed out.

"Well, Wash, if you want tuh go I guess yuh can, but"——

"Boss, Ah ain't honin' ter go 'way," Wash said quickly. "But Ah been thinkin'. If yo' is proved innercent mebbe yo'-all could do somet'ing fo' me when Ah does gib mahself up."

"I'll do everything I can for you," Joe promised. "But my innocence has by no means been proved."

Just then Tony returned with Pete Morton. The cook was a man about Tony King's age, and fully as irascible as his employer.

"Damn if I see how Joe Kidder has got tuh be

an innocent man all of a sudden when everybody knows he's a killer, but if you say keep 'em outa sight I'll do it if I have tuh knock 'em in the head an' cover 'em with a hoss-blanket," he told Tony.

"We're not so anxious tuh be roamin' around with the country full o' men huntin' for us," Joe assured him.

The horses the two had ridden were again a problem. Joe insisted that they must in some way be returned to their Indian owners, or at least be kept where they could be found.

"We'll bring the saddles in the house then, an' I'll turn the cayuses in with a bunch o' mine an' drive back over the river tuh my big pasture myself," Tony said. "Even if somebody sees 'em there they'll prob'ly figger yuh stole a coupla mine tuh take their places. In fact I'll tell 'em so."

"One thing more," Joe said diffidently. "If you git a chance to talk tuh Vivian Jackson kinda tell her that I'm all right, will yuh?"

"Fer Gawd's sake why?" Tony demanded.

"Because, for one thing, I happen tuh know she don't think I'm guilty."

"Well, I'll see," Tony replied without much enthusiasm.

As soon as it was light enough to see old Tony King collected his bunch of horses, including the two Indian ponies, and drove them across the river to his big pasture. Then he put his horse into a

lope and moved rapidly toward Joe Kidder's ranch at the mouth of Tumbling Creek.

He was not surprised to find that Comanche Charley had been there, and the men who had been on guard there against Kidder's possible return were seething with excitement over the story of Bunder's murder as it had been told them by the breed.

The sheriff of the county, a man named Wales, was there in command, and the posse was about to take to horse when King arrived.

"I sent a man up to Rarick's to have his men go across the hills to Bunder's place, an' Comanche Charley has gone to notify the Indians," the sheriff said. "If you come up from your ranch and didn't see anything of the fugitives it looks reasonable to me that they'd take to the hills. If they do they're done. The Indians will find 'em, and every point on the railroad is watched if they try to git away."

"Looks like yuh was bein' plumb masterful, Sheriff," old Tony applauded.

"I'm figgerin' on you watchin' the cattle range in case they should try to come this way and slip past us," the sheriff said.

"I'll give Burt Cahoon, my foreman, orders; but I reckon I want tuh be where Kidder is most apt tuh be," Tony said.

"I understand that you an' Kidder have had trouble," the sheriff remarked.

"I'll say we have," Tony remarked grimly.

"Do you think he'll really fight when we git him cornered?" the sheriff asked curiously.

"He'll do that little thing, so keep yore men to-together," Tony advised.

A few minutes later Tony rode around to the barn, where he had seen two men keeping aloof from the posse. Those two were Jack Binney and Walt Hart, respectively foremen of Kidder's cattle and ranch. At his approach the faces of both men became stern, and their hands were not far from their guns.

"Yuh're not ridin' with the posse I see," Tony grinned.

"Is it any o' yore business?" Binney asked coldly.

"Not par'ticklar," King grinned. "Thought it might interest you fellers tuh know, though, that I had a good long talk with yer boss this mornin'."

They took this with stony, unbelieving silence.

"Me an' him kinda buried the hatchet," Tony went on. "He convinced me that it wasn't him killed them Injuns, an' he didn't kill Bunder either. I may have tuh have some help tuh round-up this Comanche Charley an' mebbe one or two others, an' I can't hardly trust my own men not tuh spill things. I don't believe you fellers would throw yore boss down."

"Yuh're damn right we wouldn't," Jack Binney declared.

"Then listen: Joe Kidder an' the nigger he's with are hidin' in my house. Don't go around there fer it would arouse suspicion. But if anything did happen tuh me it'll be up tuh you tuh help him git away. Pete Morton is the only other man that knows they're there."

"Are you tellin' the truth?" Jack demanded.

"Hell, you fellers ain't important enough fer me tuh lie to," Tony rasped. "It seems we've all been on a wrong scent o' some kind. Joe says Bill Bunder confessed to him that it was he an Fullmer who killed the Injuns. If it was then it was Comanche Charley who told 'em to. Mebbe Jim Rarick was in with him. Joe says it was Rarick who"——

The old cattleman stopped abruptly. If he told these two that it was Rarick who had murdered their pal, Vick Yoakes, they might come undone and do things that were rash."

"Joe says what?" Jack asked eagerly.

"He says he wants Rarick left fer him tuh settle with," Tony said cannily.

"But, see here, King," Jack Binney said, as he began to get over his surprise. "You've been misbrandin' our cattle with the intention o' stealin' everything Joe's got. How the hell do you expect us tuh believe anything yuh say?"

"If yuh don't quit harpin' about them cattle damned if I don't shoot yuh in the heel," Tony

quavered, making a hard effort to keep his temper. "I've been dead shore right up until this mornin' that you fellers was fixin' over all them brands either by Kidder's orders or through spite, but me an' Joe about come tuh the conclusion that somebody else has been monkeyin', though why they should is somethin' I can't figger out."

"You mean tuh tell us that Joe's at yore ranch—an' yuh don't mean tuh give him up?" Jack demanded incredulously.

Old Tony threw up his hands in disgust; then wheeling his horse he started to ride away. He had gone but a few yards, however, until he turned back.

"Joe asked me tuh tell Vivian Jackson if I saw her that he was all right. He says she thinks he ain't guilty, so if you see her yuh might let her know. But better not tell her where Joe is," he advised, and then rode away.

"Reckon that old goat could've been tellin' the truth?" Jack wondered as he watched Tony riding away.

"I wouldn't trust him," Hart said promptly, "but I can't see why he would lie."

"He was surely lyin' about his men not brandin' them cattle," Jack declared. "Prob'ly he's lyin' about the rest."

"More'n likely it's a trick tuh git us down tuh his place," Walt Hart declared. "They've been sore because Lute got away. They figger we're hidin'

him out some place, an' if they git one of us down there mebbe they figger they'll make us tell where he is."

"That's about it," Jack said. "By tellin' us not tuh go down there he prob'ly figgered we'd be hell bent tuh go. That old coot is foxy. Just the same I'm gonna hunt up Vivian Jackson an' have a talk with her. He can't know that she's workin' with us, an' she might be able tuh go down there an' kinda find out if there was anything in it."

"Good idee," Hart approved.

Meantime Tony King was on his way to his cow camp. He had a talk with his foreman, and then after dinner he mounted a fresh horse and headed back into the hills which were being scoured by large bodies of men in an effort to find Joe Kidder and the negro. He knew that his advice would have considerable weight with the sheriff and others as soon as they found out the men they wanted were not within the circle they had drawn. He felt it would be comparatively easy for him then to keep everybody well away from his ranch. Until that time there was no particular need to hurry.

He was riding along the top of a ridge on a walk, sitting somewhat slouchily in the saddle, both hands resting on the fork, gazing far ahead for sight of some of the posse, but paying little attention to his immediate surroundings. Thus he did not see two men who were lying upon the grass in the

shadow of a clump of big pine trees about three hundred yards away. Their horses were hidden out of sight in the thick brush far down the side of the canyon, and no one would have expected to find unmounted men in that vicinity.

"Look, there comes Tony King now," remarked Comanche Charley.

"All right. We'd just as well have him now as later," Jim Rarick said with a cynical grin. "Pull down on him."

"Me, I'm afraid I miss at that distance," the half breed whined.

"Well, I won't," Rarick said. He moved swiftly so that he knelt behind a tree, and resting elbow upon knee he drew a careful bead upon the center of Tony King's body.

As the shot reverberated from hill to hill old Tony's horse gave a sudden, startled leap. It's rider's head was jerked back, and he fell sideways from the saddle.

Old Tony's sightless eyes stared unblinkingly into the sun.

XX

THE CONSPIRATORS

FOR a moment after Tony King had fallen the two men in the pines looked at each other with wide, frightened eyes. The half breed was trembling violently, but Rarick grinned with an attempt at bravado.

"I reckon that settles him," Rarick gloated.

"Yuh reckon it was safe tuh kill him here, in daylight?" the other quavered.

"Why not? There ain't another man in five miles o' here right now. If they ain't got Kidder by this time they'll sure figger it was him run across King," Rarick said.

"Jim, d'ye reckon we dare try tuh claim them cattle now?" Comanche Charley asked nervously.

"Why not? The J-K-Bar-Dash iron is recorded in my name. Old King come into this country before they were in the habit o' recordin' brands, an' he never bothered tuh have his recorded. Kidder's iron is recorded in the state brand book, but not in this county. It wouldn't matter if it was because Kidder ain't in no position tuh go tuh court.

King's got no relatives in this country, an' when they appear they can't buck against a recorded brand. Now that Burt Cahoon an' Glines an' Ferner is in with us an' will swear that King told 'em he'd sold me his cattle they can't do a thing," Rarick argued.

The half breed's eyes began to grow flinty with greed. "If we don't git suspected o' some o' these murders it sure looks great," he declared.

"Kidder will be blamed for everything," Rarick laughed. "Even though he does claim Bill Bunder confessed nobody will believe him, an' the chances are he'll be killed any way before he can talk. Cahoon will soon fire all the old K-Bar-Dash men except Eric Glines an' Ad Ferner, an' then all we'll have tuh deal with is one or two o' Kidder's men an' that'll be easy."

"Hadn't we better git away from here?" Comanche Charley asked nervously.

"We'd just as well make a big circle around an' join the posse," Rarick agreed. "There's not much chance now of Kidder comin' this way before dark."

The two culprits had got their heads together and decided that in view of Joe Kidder's desperation he might have hid himself in the brush of Tumbling Creek with the intention of trying to waylay one of them as he had caught Comanche Charley the night before. Because the grove of pines they were in commanded a good view of the

country they had concealed themselves there instead of going with the posse. It was Kidder they were out to get at that time, but Tony King was also on their list marked for destruction, and Rarick had not hesitated to pick him off when the time was propitious.

For a long time the two men had been content to pick up mavericks and put various brands upon them, disposing of them by way of certain crooked Indian friends of Comanche Charley's, but increasing success had made them bold and avaricious. Revenge upon Joe Kidder had been the dominating motive at first but their success in turning King so bitterly against Kidder had given them the idea of combining the brands of the two outfits. With Kidder framed up as he was and King dead they could see nothing to stop them from getting all the cattle of both outfits.

"Yuh sure yuh passed the word around tuh all the Injuns tuh kill Kidder before the white men could git to him?" Rarick inquired once.

The half breed grinned evilly. "They don't need to be told," he affirmed.

"I'd a lot rather see him hung, but now that he's made Bunder squeal it's best tuh git him outa the road as quick as possible," Rarick said regretfully.

Comanche Charley had neglected to tell Rarick all that had occurred the previous night, particularly the part that had reference to his own admissions.

Indeed the story he had told Rarick confidentially (it varied considerably from the one he had told the sheriff) was that he had been surprised by Kidder at Rarick's stable, and though threatened with torture had refused to talk. Upon being confronted with Bunder and finding that worthy loose-tongued he had torn his knife away from Kidder, stabbed Bunder with it and made his escape. It did not vary much from the truth, but it placed him in a much more heroic light than the actual facts justified.

"There's one thing queer, Jim," he remarked, just after they had mounted their horses. "Kidder knew that you killed young Yoakes. Bunder didn't know it, an' I know damn well I didn't tell—but he knew."

"By Gawd, you musta told it then," Rarick flashed out, his face livid with sudden anger.

"I tell yuh I didn't," Comanche returned stolidly. At the same time a cunning, cruel look came into his coal-black eyes. "Far as I can see there's only one way he coulda found out."

"How's that?" Rarick demanded sharply.

"That kid o' your'n," the breed said malignantly.

"Huh?" Rarick was visibly startled.

"We have talked much," the breed said in a low but rapid voice. "You have not always been careful. Small boys have big ears."

"Hell, Dutch wouldn't tell," Rarick scoffed. "He

wouldn't dare to fer one reason, an' he hates Kidder fer another."

"Yet when I rode up tuh yore place last night Dutch was outside—alone. Kidder was also there very close, for he jammed his gun against me but a minute after Dutch went inside," the breed leered. The boy's refusal to tend to his horse had angered him, and he hoped this would be the means of bringing down wrath upon Dutch's head.

Rarick remained silent, but he was thinking. He recalled the conversation between himself and his son the night before, and the boy had used the murder of Yoakes as a threat. It seemed that Comanche Charley was right. In no other way could Kidder have found that out. He might have been—must have been hiding behind the woodpile while they were talking! And if he was there then, Rarick reflected, he must have been there also when Vivian Jackson was there pleading in his behalf!

A wave of angry jealousy suddenly swept over the man. What business had Vivian to feel any interest in his enemy? He recalled how she had always insisted upon Kidder's innocence, and suddenly he remembered that she had questioned his own movements rather critically. He was well aware of the influence she wielded over Dutch since he himself had foolishly forced the boy to behave himself in school. Could it be possible, he wondered now, that Vivian was actually in love with Joe Kidder

and was just spying upon him, and trying to get information out of Dutch?

"Dutch never talked tuh Kidder," he said after a while, "but I'll make damned shore that he holds his tongue after I git home."

A smile of cruel triumph for a moment flickered over the ugly face of the half breed. He was not entirely without plans himself. Once their joint scheme was completely successful he saw where he could profit considerably by the elimination of Jim Rarick. But he was in no hurry. It would not take Rarick long to destroy himself if he could just get the man suspicious enough of his own son. Deep down in his heart the half breed hated them both.

Neither of them guessed that for hours the ferret-like eyes of Dutch Rarick had been upon them from where the boy lay concealed upon the other side of the canyon.

XXI

"JUST A CUP OF COFFEE"

IT was late that evening before the body of Tony King was found. Some of the posse returning from the fruitless search for Joe Kidder and the negro encountered his horse, and knowing that something must be wrong conducted a search that resulted in finding the corpse just after sun-down.

Immediately riders were dispatched all over the country with the news, and it was the nearly unanimous view that Joe Kidder had somehow broken through the cordon of his enemies, but had encountered King on the way and murdered him. These believed that Kidder must have taken refuge in the brush along Tumbling Creek, and the search for him there was carried on until after midnight. A few others clung to the belief that King might have been mistaken for Kidder by some member of the posse, who had fired too hastily, and had then decided to keep quiet about it.

Upon none did the latest crime have a more electrical effect than upon Jack Binney. The range foreman had been a badly worried man for weeks,

but ever since his employer's escape from jail he had been nearly frantic. His talk with Tony King that morning had bothered him all day, and for all that he believed King to be lying he could not get it off his mind. He had not found time to go to see Vivian Jackson, but he meant to do it the next day. But when he heard the news of Tony's death it was hard for him to keep from rushing over to Cleary's immediately to see the girl.

He knew it would not do, but the murder of King had suddenly brought conviction to his mind that King was telling the truth, and that Joe Kidder was in hiding at the King ranch. The murder indicated that somebody must have found out that King had again become friendly with Joe. And even if the murderer did not know where the fugitives were they would certainly soon be discovered now that King was dead. King's body, Jack had heard, had been taken to Jim Rarick's ranch, but the next day it would be taken home, so it was rumored.

A dozen members of the posse had quartered themselves at the Kidder ranch, and Jack realized that if he moved off the place he would be followed. For him to ride down to King's place would be to lead Joe's enemies directly to him. Nor did he dare seek an interview with Vivian Jackson under the circumstances. He talked it over with Walt Hart, but that was all he could do about it that night.

The next morning he announced his intention of riding out on the range to look after the neglected JK Connected cattle, but he fooled around the place helping Walt until most of the intruders had ridden away. That there would be somebody hanging around to watch his movements was certain, for the posse had not given up the idea that Kidder would try to communicate with his men.

He was just about to mount his horse, the fastest one in his string by the way, and one on which he felt he could throw off most any kind of pursuit, when he saw a familiar looking gray pony coming across the meadow from the direction of the Cleary place at top speed. He waited a few minutes more before mounting and then he was sure that it was Vivian Jackson herself approaching.

He swung on to his horse and rode down to meet the girl just as she crossed the bridge over the Portneuf, within a hundred yards of Kidder's neat frame ranchhouse. He observed at once that her face was white and tense.

"Jack, what do you make of Tony King's murder?" she asked at once.

"It may mean quite a lot, Vivian," he said.

"Joe didn't kill him," she said. "They say he was shot in the back. I can't believe Joe would do that, even though he and King were enemies."

"Joe didn't," Jack assured her. "I have reason to believe that he was hiding in Tony's house all day

yesterday, an' probably is still there—unless they've already discovered him."

"What? Jack, you don't mean to say"——

He told her of his conversation with Tony King the morning before.

"But why haven't you gone down there and found out for sure," she protested.

"An' lead 'em straight to him," Jack smiled bitterly.

"Of course," the girl said ruefully. "Anyway, we must find out for sure, someway."

"Have you seen Lute this mornin'?" he asked in a guarded tone.

"Yes. He's terribly impatient. The only way we can keep him quiet much longer is by telling him that we hope to find Joe and have them both hide there together," Vivian replied.

"We've got tuh git Joe away from King's tuh-night—if he's really there," Jack said. "I know old Pete Morton a little, an' he's one determined old cuss. If he's really protectin' Joe they'll have a hard time gittin' to him, but there'll be a lot o' people around there."

"I'm going down there, Jack," the girl said with a glint of determination in her eyes. "I'll find out from Morton if he's there, but if he is—what can I do?"

"They watch me an' Walt like hawks," Jack said in a worried tone. "If we try tuh help they'll nab

him sure. We'll have to plant a horse for him close to King's place, an' git word to him where to go. It'll have to be done after night, but none of us can do it."

"I'll try," the girl said.

"Absolutely not. If you can have a talk with Pete Morton an' git word to Joe what to do that'll be all we can expect. Somebody else will have to take the horse," Jack said.

"It would be hard for me to get away from the Clearys after dark," Vivian admitted.

"Look here:" Jack exclaimed suddenly. "Lute's able to ride now, an' nobody knows he's in the country. He's the one who'll have tuh help Joe!"

"Why not?" the girl said excitedly. "What had he better do, Jack?"

"Let me see," Binney thought aloud, himself only slightly less excited than the teacher. "Lute knows the ranch horses. Old Split ain't so much of a horse any more, but yuh can ketch him anywhere, an' he's good tuh lead. I'll have Walt turn him an' Rooster into the lower horse pasture. It's only twenty acres, an' there's nothin' in it now but a few gentle mares an' colts. If you could forgit tuh turn yore gray loose tuh-night Lute could git on him, an' ride over tuh the pasture an' ketch ole Split. Then he could rope Rooster an' take yore gray back home. Then he could ride down as close tuh King's as is safe an' wait for Joe. If it ain't safe for him tuh git

the gray he can walk over tuh the pasture after ole Split."

"It'll work—I'm sure it'll work!" the girl cried. "Where shall I have Joe meet Lute—if he's down there?"

"Let me see," Jack thought. "There's an old, deserted cabin on what they call the Clegg place. Nobody goes there, an' it's only a mile from King's. Tell Pete Morton tuh have Joe look for Lute there."

"Would it be safe to tell Morton where we intend to hide Joe?" Vivian asked.

"I don't believe we'd better. Pete will be dependable enough on what old Tony told him to do, but after that he might shoot off his mouth," Jack opined.

"Well then I'll go in and see Nellie Hart a few minutes and then I'll ride down to King's," Vivian said, her bosom heaving with the excitement of the thing they contemplated.

"Don't be in too big a hurry," said cautious Binney. "Everything must be made tuh appear casual tuh keep 'em from gittin' suspicious."

"Oh, I'll be careful," the girl promised. She rode on up to the house, where Walt Hart's wife was eagerly awaiting her. Jack Binney watched her a moment, then he, too, rode on.

"If that girl thought as much o' me as she does Joe Kidder damned if I wouldn't be ready tuh change places with him, hard-run as he is," he mur-

mured to himself. The cowboy had fallen wildly in love with the pretty school-teacher several months before. but he was wise enough to know that his case was hopeless, and so no one would ever guess his secret.

In their eager planning to help Joe Kidder neither of them had remembered that he had a companion, and so no provision was made for Wash White.

It was a little after noon when Vivian Jackson rode up to the King ranchhouse. She was more than a little dismayed by the crowd around the place, but she assumed as calm a manner as she could and rode boldly into the yard.

The place seemed to be alive with men. Some of them were neighbors with whom she was acquainted; others were strangers from the county seat, as their clothes bore witness; some were people who had been drawn by the man hunt; while there was a score of Indians who preferred the excitement of a crowd to the hard work of searching the hot, dry hills for a couple of men who seemed singularly elusive.

The first man to speak to the girl was John Cleary. "What brought you down here, Vivian?" he asked with a shade of disapproval in his voice.

"Have they brought the body home?" she asked, without answering his question.

"Yes. It's now in King's own bedroom. The undertaker from the county seat is embalmin' it tuh

hold till they try tuh find out if he had any relatives," Cleary informed.

"Have they had the inquest?" she asked.

"Yeah, that was held over at Rarick's. Jury said he was killed by some unknown person, but it's a cinch he run across Joe Kidder. But how come you here?" Cleary repeated.

"Why, Mr. King was one of my trustees!" the girl said, pretending to be amazed at anyone questioning her presence. "I certainly owe him the respect of calling and finding out if there is anything I can do."

"Well, there ain't," Cleary said crossly. "An' these men think it's strange fer a woman tuh be here. King never had no women folks around his place yuh know."

"One can't be a country school-teacher without having people curious about her every movement, but I don't mind," Vivian said. "I wonder if I could see the body?"

"No, it ain't ready," Cleary said crossly.

"Well, I haven't had any lunch, and while I'm waiting I'm going to see if I can beg the cook for a hand-out," she said, as she swung down.

"Aw, fer Gawd's sake, Vivian, I thought you knew what was proper," Cleary deprecated angrily.

"I think I do, Mr. Cleary," she said with dangerous sweetness.

For all that he was shocked Cleary was not rash

enough to lose a profitable, all-the-year-around boarder. "Old Pete Morton ain't no gentleman," he said. "You wait here an' I'll ask him."

"Thanks, but I prefer to do my own asking," she said. Nevertheless Cleary accompanied her to the kitchen, very much to her disgust.

They found Pete Morton washing dishes as energetically as though every dish were a foe upon which he must vent his spite. Cleary hemmed and hawed a bit before he ventured an introduction.

"Pete, this is Miss Jackson, the teacher," he finally got out.

The cook glared at the girl malevolently.

"How do you do, Mr. Morton," Vivian said warmly. "You know I've heard so much about what a wonderful cook you are that I wondered if you wouldn't give me a bite to eat."

Such crude flattery would not work with Pete. "No," he bellowed. "I've just fed the men who work here, but I told all these damn loafers I wouldn't feed a one o' 'em. A woman ain't no better'n anybody else tuh me."

"Come on, Vivian, I told you"——Cleary began.

"Will you please go outside and let me ask Mr. Morton myself," the girl said coldly.

"It won't do yuh no good, 'cause I don't cook no more fer nobody till supper time, an' then just fer the men that work here," Pete snorted.

Vivian imperiously waved Cleary outside. "Just

a cup of coffee then," she wheedled, and shut the door in Cleary's face.

Pete turned red in the face, and slamming his dish rag into the pan he advanced upon the girl without bothering to wipe his dripping fingers. "No, yuh won't git just a cup o' coffee," he mimiced. "No woman"——

"Listen," Vivian whispered tensely, "Is Joe Kidder here yet?"

Pete Morton's eyes almost popped from their sockets. "H-how the hell did you know?" he gasped.

XXII

A HARROWING WAIT

THE hours following Tony King's departure were full of acute suspense to Joe Kidder. The days spent in jail had been tedious; the hours in Bill Bunder's cabin fraught with danger, but in jail he had not expected anything to happen, and at Bunder's he had been in a limited way master of his own movements; but here he could only hope that things would turn out right. His destiny was in the hands of Tony King and Pete Morton—and he could not be sure of either of them.

He had been ready to trust Tony King a few hours before, when they were talking things over, but after his departure he could not help wondering if King had only tricked him, and was having Pete Morton, and perhaps other men, keep watch over him till he could return with a larger posse. Still, it was not like old Tony to run for help when it could be avoided, and this encouraged him a little when he began to feel too discouraged.

He had no cause for complaint so far as Pete Morton was concerned. No one came near the bed-

room where they were concealed in comparative comfort, and soon after the hired men had eaten and departed Pete appeared with their breakfast of hot cakes, bacon and coffee.

Characteristically Wash piled himself upon the bed and went to sleep, as though he had never a care in the world. But though Joe had had a strenuous night he was unable to close his eyes. His understanding with Tony King, if it proved genuine, promised at least a chance of complete vindication, and he could not rest for fear that some little thing might occur to knock all plans awry.

At dinner time Pete brought their meal in to them with the same manner of forbearing silence. It was obvious that they did not stand ace-high with Pete, but he had his orders from Tony, and he would live up to them, and woe to the man who tried to interfere with him. Joe knew better than to start a conversation with him.

Supper was but a repetition of dinner, and after the cook had taken the dishes away Joe pulled off his boots and threw himself on Tony's bed. Wash wrapped himself in a quilt on the floor and continued to slumber. His capacity for sleep seemed unlimited.

Joe had just dropped asleep when the door was opened softly; yet almost noiseless though it was Joe sat up in bed, his gun trained upon the dim figure at the door.

"Put up that damned gat," Pete Morton growled. "I ain't done nothin' tuh yuh, an' yuh may have tuh use it on somebuddy real'y dangerous purty soon."

"Sorry, Pete. I was startled, an' I didn't know it was you," Joe said. "Heard anything from Tony?"

"Plenty," Pete said succinctly. "He's dead."

Joe was too dumfounded to speak.

Pete came in and shut the door behind him. "Now what the hell are we gonna do?" he fairly snarled. "They'll be bringin' the body home in the mornin', an' the place'll be flooded with a pack o' cur'us damn fools who'll want me tuh cook fer 'em. How the hell am I gonna keep 'em off yuh?"

"It can't be done, so I reckon we'll be travelin'," Joe said. "How did Tony git killed?"

"They say he was shot in the back," Pete said quietly, but with such a ring of bitterness as Joe had never heard a man use before.

"Nobody knows who done it?" Joe asked, aghast.

"Yeah, they all know who done it," Pete said cynically. "They know it was you."

"What?"

"I'd a thought so myself if I hadn't knowed yuh was right here," Pete said. "I've worked for Tony King twenty year, an' I reckon I been closter to him than any other man. Just let me git my hands on the skunk that killed him that's all."

"I'd like tuh meet that party myself," Joe said. "We'll be pullin' out now, but if there's any clue at all I'd like tuh have it. It seems tuh me somebody must have found out that he was befriendin' me an' got him for it."

All during their talk Wash had been snoring loudly. When Joe started to wake him up Pete stopped him.

"Let the cuss sleep. An' yuh'd better git some rest yoreself," the cook said.

"But we can't stay here," Joe protested.

"Yuh can't stay nowhere else in this country, that's a lead pipe cinch," Pete remarked. "Once yuh leave here"—— he finished with a meaningful shrug.

"But you can't hide us after this, an' if we was found here it would only git you into trouble," Joe argued.

"I told Tony I'd take care o' yuh, an' damned if I don't mean tuh do it, but yuh'll have tuh move at daylight," Pete said. "The only place I know of tuh keep yuh safe is up in the loft. I'll give yuh a few quilts an' some san'wiches, but yuh'll have tuh keep that nigger awake. If he snores or sneezes the stuff'll be off."

Because he had no other place to go Joe reluctantly gave his consent, but he was full of misgivings. The worst of it was that there was no hope of getting Rarick and the half breed in a position

where he could settle with them. He felt that Pete Morton could be trusted, but Pete would not be able to entice the men there, even if he consented to try it.

After Pete had taken his departure Joe again lay down on the bed, but it was hard to go to sleep. Tony's murder, coming so swiftly after their reconciliation argued that their enemies were on the watch, and were taking no chances. Joe would not have been surprised to hear a posse coming after him at any minute. And if they did he resolved to sell his life as dearly as possible. If they would let him finish up his business he would return voluntarily and let them do what they would with him, but otherwise they would have to take him against his best effort to prevent it, and that best would be no little thing.

He managed to sleep by fits and snatches, but he was on his feet at daybreak when Pete opened the door, and brought in their smoking breakfast. He roused Wash, and while they ate Pete prepared a place for them in the attic directly over what served as the living room of King's house. They climbed up to it by means of a table and some loose boards in the ceiling. They replaced the boards and Pete removed the table to another part of the room. They found quilts to lie upon, which made them fairly comfortable, and also the sandwiches and a bucket of water which Pete had promised. There

was not room in the loft for them to stand erect, and whenever they moved with any freedom the ceiling boards squeaked.

It was not long until they heard people moving about in the rooms under them, and frequently they could hear snatches of conversation, but there was nothing of particular importance to them.

Thus began the longest, most nearly intolerable day Joe Kidder was ever to know. It seemed that the people moving about below shook the house just enough to create a fine cloud of dust that had been lying upon the floor of the long-unused loft, or else it filtered through the cracks from the floor below. At any rate it was too intangible to be seen, and yet the tiny particles worked themselves consistently into the eyes, mouths and nostrils of the men. They had an almost constant desire to sneeze or cough.

Though Joe had been unable to sleep well during the night he now experienced an almost overwhelming desire to sleep. He was a light sleeper and a silent one. The first time the feeling came upon him he yielded to it. Wash had been sleeping so much that he thought the negro could be depended upon to see that he did not snore or roll about. He had, however, scarcely closed his eyes than he was awakened by a rasping sound like somebody filing a saw beside his ear. Looking swiftly at Wash he saw the big negro's mouth flopped open, and he

was just getting up steam to indulge in one of his fits of terrific snoring.

Joe clapped one hand over the negro's mouth, and gouged him vigorously in the ribs with the thumb of the other hand. Wash snorted and flopped about like a fish for nearly a minute before Joe succeeded in quieting him.

There was an ominous silence below, and then they heard someone bawling out an inquiry to Pete Morton as to what was the matter in the loft, "house haunted, or something?"

"Gotta lotta mice in the house an' I put a coupla cats up there yesterday," they heard Pete reply. Presently the general chatter was renewed.

Though that immediate danger was removed Joe dared not close his eyes again. If he had another lapse Wash was almost sure to snore, and Pete's fiction of the two cats would not work the second time. At times it became sheer torture to keep from sneezing as the fine dust worked itself into his nostrils, and he had to be continuously alert to keep Wash from dropping off to sleep. It seemed to him that the day would be endless.

There were times when Joe wished he could strangle the big negro. Wash had been faithful, but Joe was far from thinking that an asset. The big negro had come to be a handicap, "but he's my burden, an' I'll have to shoulder him," Joe grimly communed to himself.

About a thousand years had passed when Joe's attention was distracted from watching the negro by a familiar name he heard mentioned by some person below.

"What yuh reckon that school-teacher from Cleary's is doin' here?" he heard asked.

He did not hear what was said next, but there was that peculiar kind of a lewd, half ashamed laugh from the crowd that made him guess pretty much what had been said, and made him clinch his fists furiously.

"Damn funny tuh me," said a man, "that that gal should be hangin' around this country when her school's out. Near's as I can hear all she does is hang around the men, an' it looks kinda off color tuh me."

"She kin hang around me if she wants tuh," said a laughing voice.

"Shut up—here comes Cleary," said another, and the subject was abruptly changed. None too soon for Joe Kidder, however, for his hand had gripped his gun, and he was upon his knees. Another such a remark as he had heard and he would have dropped into the room to defend the girl's name regardless of consequences.

Joe felt Wash's powerful hand pulling him back down on the quilts, and the red rage gradually passed from his mind. He wondered much himself why Vivian had stayed in the country, and what she

was doing there at King's. He listened eagerly for the sound of her voice, and finally he thought he heard her clear tones back in the kitchen. Once he was minded to crawl along the loft until he was directly overhead the cook's domicile, but the creaking boards forced him to give up the project.

Another eon or two passed into eternity before Joe discovered that it had turned dark in the loft except where shafts of light from the lamps in the rooms below poured through cracks in the ceilings. About this time he heard a heated argument in the living room between Pete Morton and two men whose voices were strange to him.

"By Gawd, we will git somethin' to eat if we have tuh cook it ourselves," one of the men said.

"Yuh'll stay outa my kitchen," Pete said irascibly. "Nobody here invited yuh tuh stay all night. We got men enough around here tuh set up with the body."

"But, yuh damn fool, the sheriff ordered us tuh stay here," one of the men objected.

"Then let the sheriff feed yuh," Pete retorted testily.

"Yo're one hell of a man, you are," one man said savagely. "An' they talk about the hospitality o' these Western ranches," he added witheringly.

"Horse-pital or no horse-pital, yuh can't eat here," Pete declared with finality.

Morton seemed to have won the debate for pres-

ently Joe overheard the two special officers talking together.

"There's a ranch about two miles below here, Nelse," said one. "I'll watch over old King while you ride down there an' git some supper. When you git back I'll go. I suppose we could make this old pelican of a cook feed us, but we'd better not git into more trouble than we have to."

"All right, Nick," agreed the other. "I won't be gone long."

There was silence in the living room and Joe judged that most of the people who had been hanging around all day had gone elsewhere. Apparently the special officer called Nick had gone into the bedroom where the corpse lay. A few minutes later the beams of light from the living room ceased to come up through the cracks. They decided it was a good time to eat the remainder of their sandwiches.

A few minutes later Joe listened eagerly as he heard furtive, shuffling sounds from the room below. It was, he thought Pete Morton moving the table under the loose boards. He knew it would be dangerous trying to get out and away, but anything then seemed preferable to the painful monotony of the loft.

Then, suddenly, Joe heard the tramping of many feet outside the house, and it flashed into his mind that there was a business-like ring to their tread.

Obviously Pete Morton had heard it, too, for the table was moved back to its original place much more swiftly and noisily than it had been moved before. Almost immediately Joe heard the officer, Nick, open the connecting door into the living room and loudly demand the meaning of the sudden racket.

There was no reply to the officer from the cook, but the front door was thrown open, and the men outside filed into the living room. The first voice Joe heard was Jim Rarick's.

"Look here, Morton," the man said cripsly, "we want tuh know what yuh've done with Joe Kidder?"

XXIII

SURROUNDED BY ENEMIES

THE only thing Joe could see clearly was the whites of Wash White's eyes.

"Boss," whispered the negro huskily, "Ah has a feelin' dat if mah feet was jes' on de groun' dat Ah could jes' nat'rally outrun a race hoss."

"Keep still," Joe ordered with a terse whisper.

From the room below came the voice of Pete Morton, calm and undismayed if one could judge by the tone of his voice.

"Gone crazy have yuh, Rarick?" he asked insultingly.

"Never mind bluffin'," Rarick returned. "We know damn well that Kidder an' that nigger are somewhere on this ranch. They couldn't hide out without help, an' we know that none o' the other boys that work here have seen 'em."

"Interestin' if true," Pete sneered.

"Well, we're damn quick gonna find out if it's true, an' it'll go hard with you if it is," Rarick retorted.

"How long yuh figger these murderers have been hidin' here?" Pete demanded.

"Since night before last. They musta come here right after killin' Bill Bunder," Rarick said.

"Then that kind o' lets 'em out o' killin' Tony, don't it?" Pete countered. "Seems tuh me like they said Tony was killed right close tuh yore place."

"Damn yore soul, are you insinuatin' anything?" Rarick raged, obviously surprised and angered at being put on the defensive.

"No more than you are," Pete said firmly. "I got as much right tuh say you murdered Tony as you have tuh say I been hidin' Kidder."

The special officer detailed to guard Tony King's body now took a hand. "What reason have yuh got for thinkin' Kidder may be around here, Rarick?" he asked.

"For one thing because the whole country has been scoured, an' he can't be any place else."

"That's not very convincin'," said officer Nick.

"Well, I've got evidence that is," Rarick came back. "These Indians have been scoutin' around all over the country, an' today they run across the two horses that Kidder took away from two young bucks at Tommy Racehorse's camp. They were over in King's big pasture across the river."

"An' what does that prove?" the officer asked.

"It might've only proved that they turned the horses loose there, except that the saddles couldn't be found. But Burt Cahoon here, Tony King's foreman, says he knows that the bunch of horses

they was with must've been drove away from right here yesterday mornin'," Rarick shot out.

"That's right," chimed in the voice of Cahoon.

"But still I don't see why yuh'd suspect anybody here of helpin' hide 'em," the officer said. "King an' Kidder were deadly enemies."

"Yes, but that don't mean that Kidder an' his gang were enemies with the feller who inherits King's estate," Rarick said. "In fact that feller might be in quite some hurry tuh git Tony King outa the road, an' so agree tuh help hide Kidder in return for some o' the Kidder gang bumpin' King off."

"Just what're yuh drivin' at?" the officer asked.

"D'ye know what just came over the wire from the county seat?"

"Why, no."

"Tony King left a will, an' the lawyer who had it just telegraphed it tuh the sheriff a few hours ago. The feller who brought the telegram from town missed the sheriff, but he told us what was in the message. Do yuh know who the damned old fool left his property to?" Rarick said with undisguised disgust.

"Of course not."

"To that damned, wall-eyed cook there," Rarick hissed.

"I never knowed a thing about it," Pete protested.

"Sounds likely, don't it?" Rarick sneered. "I reckon now yuh'll be ready tuh help us search the place for them murderers, won't yuh?" The last remark was, of course, directed to the officer.

"Why, I never objected tuh that," the officer said weakly. "If they're round here we want 'em."

"Scatter out, boys, an' look the place over," Rarick directed. "Comanche, you take yore Injuns an' prod around the stack-yards an' under the bridges along the river close here. Cahoon, you an' yore outfit search the out-buildings, an' the rest of us will search the house."

"Yuh can look anywhere except in my kitchen," Pete spoke up irascibly. "That's one place I won't have people pesterin' around."

"Yuh won't, huh?" There was the sound of a brief struggle, interspersed with curses, and then the crowd all seemed to head toward the forbidden kitchen.

Joe and Wash were on their knees, ready to remove the loose boards and drop. Joe knew that the two saddles were hidden in one side of a huge flour bin in the kitchen, and that it would be only a matter of minutes before they were found. Then their own hiding place would not go long undiscovered. Still, they waited a minute or so before taking the drop that was almost sure to lead to death or capture.

They heard the door leading to the kitchen slam,

and Joe thought he heard a lock click. He took it for his cue, and parting the boards he swung down by his arms and dropped. At first Joe thought Pete Morton was alone in the room, but as his feet touched the floor a gun was jabbed into the small of his back.

"Hands up, Kidder," snapped Nick, the special officer.

Joe stood perfectly still, momentarily petrified by the command. It was hard to keep his self possession with the business end of a gun at his back ready to drill a hole through him. He had a gun in his own hand, but no chance to use it.

"Hey men"—— the officer lifted up his voice, but just then the bulky body of Wash White struck him on the shoulders and he went down.

"Whang!" Down came the butt of Wash's gun upon the back of the officer's head, and the man went limp.

"This way," Pete called, leaping with surprising agility toward the door leading into Tony King's bedroom.

Men were hammering at the door leading to the kitchen, but Pete had snapped the lock, and it held.

"If yuh kin git tuh the old Clegg house yuh'll find Lute Marsh waitin' for yuh there with horses," Pete whispered, as he threw open an outside window and pointed for them to exit that way.

A moment later they were outside, and instantly

Joe saw Wash flash by him as the negro made a wild run for freedom. There was nothing for Joe to do, but follow suit. Fortunately for them there happened to be no searchers on that side of the house at the moment, though Joe heard the locked door give way just as he began to run. Equally fortunately for them Wash was headed in the best possible direction.

A few hundred feet to the north of the house the ground dipped abruptly and at the foot of the dip the hay meadow began. The hay was up nearly high enough to cut, but the water had not yet been turned off, so that it was practically impossible to ride a horse over it; yet a man on foot, though bogging nearly to the knee at every step could manage to get along. By day the meadow would have afforded no shelter, but in the darkness they could drop down in the swaying grass and remain hidden, though uncomfortable.

They had not reached the top of the dip before guns were popping at them from the window they had just emerged from. The wind of the bullets fanned Joe's cheeks, and when he saw Wash leap high in the air he felt sure that his companion had been hit. It turned out, however, that it was only Wash's manner of accelerating his speed.

The dip of the ground protected them momentarily, and they did not plunge at once into the wet grass. Instead, they turned sharply to the left,

which happened to be in the direction of the river. Wash was still leading. When the men behind got to the top of the declivity the fugitives were again exposed, but they had made some small gain because of a certain confusion among their enemies, many of whom had paused long enough to shout at others to come on.

As the guns began to bark again Wash put on another burst of speed that left Joe behind. "They'll head us off that way," Joe called. "We gotta take tuh the grass."

Wash executed a sudden turn, and hit the water around the grass roots with a resounding splash. Near the edge the water was not deep, and they made good time. But when three or four rods out they began to flounder. The enemy were spreading out along the rim of the low hill to cut them off if they attempted to get back to dry ground, and apparently with seeming reluctance to taking to the water themselves. But Joe realized that they could not permit their foes to quietly take aim while they were wallowing through the muck like hogs, and calmly shoot them down. He dropped to his knees to obscure himself as much as possible and opened fire upon the group of men whose guns were already sending streaks of orange flame in his direction.

So far as he could see he did not hit anybody, for he was in no position to take careful aim; but he

did effect a scattering and kept them from remaining stationary. When only one cartridge remained in his gun he again got up and floundered forward.

"Git yore horses," he heard somebody order. He thought it was Burt Cahoon.

Suddenly he saw Wash White go down. By that time Wash was some distance ahead, and Joe lost sight of him in the tall grass. He felt a pang of regret at seeing the big negro hit, but it gave him an idea of his own, and he at once dropped upon his hands and knees in the slushy grass. It was slimy and disagreeable down there in the water, but the top of the tall timothy and red top was over his back, and his enemies could only guess at his exact whereabouts.

Ahead of him some little distance he had seen a low rise that he thought must be a small levee. If he could manage to get behind that he felt he would have a decided advantage, at least temporarily. His foes were evincing no great desire to wade out into the swampy meadow, and seemed content to wait until they were mounted. Joe knew well enough that they would be able to do little with horses.

Presently he heard Wash give a prodigious grunt a few feet from him.

"Hurt bad, Wash?" he queried in a low voice.

"Somepin musta hit me," returned the negro vaguely. "Ah was runnin' mah fool laigs off, an' de nex' t'ing Ah knew Ah had me a moufful ob grass,

an' mah haid feels lak two dozen ho'nets had all set down in de same place."

Joe guessed that the negro had been "creased" by a shot that had knocked him unconscious, and that the water he had plunged into had revived him quickly.

"Come on, black boy, if we don't wanta stay here permanent we gotta waller," Joe said with grim humor. And he could see the humor of his position. He had risked death by breaking jail, and had endured much hardship and the greatest anxiety in order to come to grips with his enemies. And now that he had his wish he was in a position that would have been ludicrous had it not been tragically dangerous. He had hoped to fight it out with them man to man, and instead he was wallowing through the muck in the most ungraceful position a man could get into, and under a hail of bullets.

"Mebbe our time'll come yet, though," he thought manfully.

The bullets were still splatting into the water, some of them uncomfortably close, but he guessed that the marksmen had no more than the occasional rustling of the grass tops to guide them.

"Take men an' surround the entire meader. Watch every ditch bank an' levee," Joe heard a voice order. He thought it was Jim Rarick. It was the very order he would have given had he been in Rarick's place, but watching the entire four hun-

dred acres of meadow was a pretty big job for the men who happened to be there. Of course in a few hours there would be enough men present to surround it like a wall, but by that time Joe hoped to be not present.

They came to the small levee he had sighted and dragged themselves across it. Joe hastily reloaded his gun and peered over the bank to observe the posse's movements. In their eagerness a few men had waded out into the swamp, and a half dozen horsemen were about to enter; some above and some below where the fugitives crouched. Joe realized that they could not stay where they were long, slow and awkward though the advance of the others was sure to be.

For the first time Joe had time to really think seriously about the hurried information Pete had given him as they left the house. Lute waiting for them at the old Clegg house with horses! What could it possibly mean? The last he had heard of Lute that young man was, like himself, a fugitive, unless he had been killed by the outlaw crowd who were misbranding the cattle. Indeed, that had been one of the things that had prompted Joe to make his escape. Anyway, he was glad to hear that Lute was all right. But how Lute happened to be out there waiting for him was beyond his comprehension. And how Pete could have known it was equally a mystery. Yet somehow he did not ques-

tion the fact. What he had to do was figure out a way to reach the old house without being observed by the enemy.

The men who had tried to wade after them were swiftly getting tired. Joe knew only too well from his own clothing that was saturated with water and oozy mud how uncomfortable such a feeling was. These fellows were soon ready to get back on dry ground. But the men on horseback were still plowing toward the levee, their horses were having hard going, and making loud sucking noises whenever a foot came up. It was easy to keep track of them. What Joe wanted to do was to identify them.

One man who evidently knew the ranch very well, had ridden to a point that projected out into the meadow, and a few jumps took him to the levee behind which the men crouched. A couple of others were also gradually beating their way to the levee on the other side of them.

Joe realized that they must stop those plunging horsemen, or else continue on into the middle of the cold, sloughy meadow. The weight of his clothes and the stiffness of his limbs told him that if they essayed the latter alternative that they might easily get out there somewhere and strike a miry place from which they would be too weak to fight themselves free. Compared to a horrible death of this kind the worst he could expect from contact with his foes did not seem appalling.

"Able tuh travel, Wash?" he asked.

"Iffen Ah kin go on mah pins, boss, Ah reckon Ah kin, but I sho' wasn't bo'n ter imitate no snake," Wash groaned.

The negro suddenly dragged himself up on top of the levee where it was reasonably dry. Immediately a couple of bullets thudded into the wet dirt, and Wash flopped back into the water like a huge black fish.

They began to creep along the side of the levee, directly toward the man who was now riding down it in their direction. They had to get rid of that man if they hoped to escape. And even if they were lucky with him it seemed that they would still be surrounded by enemies.

XXIV

"KIDDER IS CORNERED"

WHEN about a hundred feet from the lone horseman Joe suddenly saw a cross levee leading out into the meadow, and though he did not know where it would lead to he decided to take it. The horseman, however, was closer to it than they were, but he was an obstacle that had to be overcome anyway.

The man suddenly caught sight of them, and his gun blazed. "Here they are!" he yelled his discovery. It was King's foreman, Burt Cahoon.

The fellow's bullet struck directly between Joe and the negro, and brought an angry grunt from Wash. The negro jerked out his gun and opened fire. His first two shots went wild, but at the third one Cahoon's horse suddenly slipped sideways off the levee. Joe had held his own fire when Wash began to shoot, but when Cahoon disappeared with a sloppy splash Joe turned and sent a couple of shots back toward the men who were now following them up the levee. It was a long range for a six-gun but it checked the men's speed. All of them had seen Cahoon's horse fall.

They now climbed out on the levee and ran toward the other one as fast as their soggy clothing would permit. They were promptly sighted by the men along the bank but the distance and the handicap of darkness made them comparatively safe from that point. The two men on horses had started up again, but when a bullet streaked back along the levee to buzz past their horses' noses like an angry horsefly they wisely slowed down.

They could hear a great deal of shouting from the direction of the house, and make out a considerable number of men on horseback following the course Cahoon was taking, though not yet ready to follow him out in the morass. They were about to turn on to the other levee when they heard a choking cry for help. Cahoon's horse had fallen on him, and the man was unable to extricate himself. He was able to keep his head above the water as yet, but as the weight of the dead horse sank into the wet ground his chin was dragged nearer and nearer to the slimy water. That same soft soil was keeping the weight from hurting his leg, but a more uncomfortable position would have been hard to imagine.

Joe paused in a bit of uncertainty. It was against his nature to refuse to help any kind of a creature in distress, but he knew that every minute would be precious.

"Boss, jes' lemme stomp his haid inter dat muck an' Ah stops his hollerin'," Wash offered.

Joe went close enough to make sure that the man would not drown. "I reckon yore friends, if yuh got any, will pull out, so we won't bother tuh linger," he said.

"I'll git yuh fer this, Kidder, see if I don't," Cahoon gritted.

"Thanks for givin' me the first laugh I've had for weeks," Joe said and turned away.

The levee they were on was narrow and slippery, but it was far better than it was out in the grass. And it was too uncertain footing for the men with horses to follow them far. The two horsemen on the other levee had paused to liberate Cahoon from his unfortunate predicament, and by the time the task was completed Joe and Wash were well out in the meadow.

Other riders had splashed across to where the levees joined, but after a little discussion the pursuit was given up, and the men all went back to join the others on the dry bank. It did not mean, however, that they had abandoned hope of catching the fugitives. On the contrary it was the general opinion that they were the same as in the bag.

There were over twenty men present, and as soon as the word was spread around that number would be augmented by a hundred more. The entire meadow would be surrounded, and they could see no chance for the jail breakers to escape through the cordon.

The meadow stretched in an almost unbroken line clear up to Joe Kidder's own ranch, and it was the consensus of opinion that Joe would try to make his way on to his own property. He would have to cross several swift currents of water in making his way from levee to levee, King's men declared; but once inside his own fence he would be on familiar ground and would probably manage to get on ditch banks or levees and stay out of the water.

"By the time they git that far they ain't a goin' tuh be able tuh go much farther," Jim Rarick declared. "Kidder is cornered. There's no use chasin' him."

And the two fugitives were indeed having hard going. It was not long until the levee played out, and once more they were compelled to flounder along as best they could. It was just dark enough for flickering shadows and gentle rises of the hay ground to fool them into thinking they were making for levees or ditch banks, but always these were as misleading as a mirage in the desert.

In Joe's mind was the constant fear that they would unwittingly get into one those spots where the soil was sand, and where a man could sink to the waist almost as easily as though it were quicksand. Mostly those places were covered with rushes and cat-tails, but not always.

Presently Wash White began to lag. "Boss," he said once, "it 'pears ter me dat we'uns is jes' ram-

blin' 'round in circles, an Ah jes' about kain't mak' mah lef' laig keep up wid de right one."

"We'll git out," Joe encouraged. He was keeping his mind on the old Clegg cabin. If Pete Morton was telling the truth, and he had no reason to doubt his word, then that was the one chance that remained to them to escape. He was doing his best to keep going in that direction, and he knew there was less danger of the meadow being patrolled on that side than any other.

His encouragement did not, however, have much effect upon the negro. Wash was getting farther and farther behind. Suddenly the negro gave a terrified bellow for help. Looking back Joe saw that he had wabbled over to one side and had struck one of the dreaded miry places. He was struggling and gasping, and every effort was getting him in worse.

"Keep still!" Joe ordered, as he waded toward the negro. When he got within about six feet of the trapped man he found his own feet beginning to stick, and he dared not go farther.

"Don' leave me heah ter perish dis way, boss?" Wash pleaded. "Iffen ye kain't drag me outer heah fo' Gawd's sake shoot me."

For a moment Joe was filled with a horrible dread that he would have to resort to one of these alternatives. He removed his belt and ran it through the trigger guard of his gun. Then leaning as far ahead as he could he swung the gun toward the negro. At

the third effort Wash succeeded in grabbing the barrel, and in his first frantic effort almost succeeded in pulling Joe from his precarious footing.

It was ten or fifteen minutes before Wash was finally dragged out to where he could use his feet with some degree of freedom, but by that time the negro was completely exhausted and Joe was in little better shape.

"Boss, Ah fears dat Ah's jes' done gone mah limit," Wash groaned.

Joe gritted his teeth and ordered the negro to hold on to the gun, and thus with Wash tugging and dragging along behind he started to fight his way out of the swamp. He no longer made any effort to find a levee or ditch bank, but headed straight through to the solid ground in the direction of the Clegg cabin; detouring only when he saw the warning cat-tails ahead of him.

At last he saw a dark blur ahead of him that he knew was a ground swell rising from the meadow, and he pressed on with renewed courage. A little nearer and he suddenly saw the flash of a match and then the dull glow of a cigarette. His foes were still on the job. The occasional dab of flame that marked the cigarette told him that the man was riding slowly along the edge of the meadow. He gave Wash a jerk that almost sprawled the negro in the grass as he hurried to reach the bank while the fellow was riding the other way.

With sighs of relief they got their feet on solid ground. They looked like a pair of weird, yellowish ghosts. They had wallowed in the alkaline mud so much that their clothing was coated with it on the outside, though the filthy water still trickled all over their skin from their saturated garments. They still seemed weighted down.

They had about three hundred yards to go across a hard, dry flat before they reached the edge of the sagebrush. Then it was about three quarters of a mile to the old Clegg place. They had got about a third of the way across the flat when they heard the cigarette smoker coming back at a brisk trot. They dropped flat on the ground, but there was not even an ant hill to shelter them.

Even so they might have been undetected except for the rider's horse. It perhaps smelled them before it saw them, and jumped sideways. Instantly the rider looked in the direction that had frightened his horse, and saw the two suspicious looking mounds. He seemed to debate a moment, and then rode slowly toward them.

Joe slipped his belt out of the trigger guard, and gripped his gun. As the man got closer he rolled over on his side. He had expected the fellow to draw his gun, and perhaps chance a shot. He was close enough now that Joe could see him if he did prepare to shoot, but instead of that he suddenly put spurs to his horse with the intention of running

over whatever it was lying there. They had no alternative but to jump up.

As they sprang to their feet the rider's already excited horse spun on its hind legs of its own accord, and all but unseated its rider. The fellow was grabbing for his gun, but as a bullet from either Joe or Wash's gun scorched the horse's rump the animal began to buck, and the rider had all he could do to stay aboard without trying to use a gun.

Joe was doing his best to shoot the horse, but its rapid gyrations made it a poor target. Another shot apparently nicked it somewhere for it suddenly ceased to buck and began to run. The rider quickly got his gun in commission then, but he was too far away to do damage.

"Come on," Joe urged. "Those shots will bring the whole pack down on us."

There was a strip of sagebrush between the meadow and a fence that bounded the Clegg place. But from the fence over to the old house was plowed land that had been harrowed down for the sowing of fall wheat. To attempt to keep concealed while crossing this was futile.

The rider who had discovered them was also showing that he had brains. As soon as he found himself beyond revolver range he turned and followed them. He had too much respect for their guns to get any closer, but he stayed too close for them to hope to get out of his sight.

They had to choose between trying to keep the precarious shelter of the sage, or trying to reach the old house before they were overwhelmed. Joe did not hesitate a minute. If Lute was there with horses they would stand a chance. If not there was a place to make some kind of a stand if they wanted to, while hiding in the brush would only postpone the inevitable discovery.

The man behind was shooting and shouting at regular intervals, and the panting fugitives heard the shots echoed from other guns that were rapidly coming nearer. If they were to reach the old house before they were surrounded by the rapidly forming posse they would have to increase their speed. They broke into a trot, though their sodden clothing made their gait more of a shamble. Both were on the point of utter exhaustion when they reached the open door of the old house.

"Joe! Joe! Is that you?" asked a voice from the darkness inside.

"Yeah. That you, Lute?" Joe gasped.

"You bet. My Gawd, all the men in the country must be right at yo' heels," cried the puncher.

"No time tuh lose, Lute," Joe said. "Where's the horses?"

"Down here in a draw a coupla hundred yards," Lute replied. "I left 'em there because they'd be outa sight. If we hurry we can git into that old gravel ravine an' git away before they see us."

"Good," Joe said. "They won't be expectin' us tuh git horses, an' they'll naturally expect us tuh make a stand here in this old house, an' they may fool around long enough for us tuh git away. Though where we'll wind up God only knows."

"If we git away we'll be all right," Lute said. "I've been hidin' up for a month an' they ain't found me. But look here, I've only got two horses, an' there seems tuh be three of us."

"Then one'll have tuh carry double," Joe said.

"No, boss, Ah's run jes' as fah as Ah's gwin ter," Wash spoke up surprisingly. "Ah's all in, an' Ah don't aim ter be bounced aroun' no moh by no hoss. When dat posse comes up Ah's gwine ter surrendah."

"But you damn black fool, they're liable tuh hang yuh," Joe protested.

"Iffen Ah was bo'n ter be hanged Ah reckons Ah'd jes' as well git hit obbah wid." The negro's teeth flashed for a moment in a wide grin.

"But—but"—Joe began.

"Don' arguify, boss," Wash said. "I sho' does 'preciate whut yo'-all hab done fer me—'special when yo' pulled me out ob dat quaghole back yander—but Ah quits right heah."

"Well, if that's the way yuh feel about it," Joe said half angrily. In his heart, however, he was somewhat glad to be rid of the negro.

"Will yo' shake hands, boss?" the negro asked.

"Why, of course," Joe said. "Good-bye, Wash, an' good luck." He was surprised to feel a pang of real regret at parting with the negro outlaw. After all they had shared dangers together, and all in all the colored man had measured up well.

A moment later Joe and Lute were running down toward the draw where Lute had left the horses.

Wash White's thick lips parted in an unlovely grin, as he drew his gun and took his stand by a broken out window.

"Iffen de boss makes his gitaway Ah reckons dis heah posse'll hab ter be held up heah foh some li'l spell," he murmured. "An' Ah reckons Ah's de boy whut kin stop 'em foh a few minutes," he added as he sent a bullet screeching toward the first man that loomed up out of the darkness.

XXV

"GET THEM CLOTHES OFF"

IT was with a gasp of relief that Joe Kidder once more hit the seat of a saddle. Hiding in Tony King's house and blundering about in the water-soaked meadow had sadly shattered his morale, but when he found himself once more in the saddle, and on top of one of his own horses his confidence came back with a rush.

He was anxious to ask Lute some questions, but that had to be deferred until they were farther away, if that result could possibly be achieved. Silence was imperative.

Lute led the way down into a dry wash that was called "the gravel ravine." The surrounding country was flat, and this was almost the only depression deep enough to conceal a horse. But here the rattle of the gravel loosened by their horses' feet made racket enough to be heard quite a distance on a still night. The worst of it was that the ravine soon bent down toward the meadow land, and Joe knew that it must soon be abandoned.

"Which way do we go, Lute?" he ventured to ask presently.

"The schoolhouse," Lute replied softly. "It's safe if we kin git there without bein' seen."

"But how do yuh git grub? Ain't they watchin' all the boys?" Joe queried.

"Purty much," Lute said. "How the hell did yuh make it tuh the old shack, Joe? They're shore right behind yuh—we can hear 'em now—an' you an' that coon shore looked a sight even in the dark."

Suddenly the air was shattered by the sound of a shot back at the house they had just vacated. Instinctively they stopped their horses.

"By Gawd, I wonder if they're brutes enough tuh murder Wash after he surrenders?" Joe murmured.

Other shots came in rapid succession, and occasionally they could hear a high-pitched voice shouting a command.

"They're in there all right! Surround the house an' give 'em hell!" was an order that came clearly to their ears. And suddenly Joe understood the negro's reason for staying behind. For a moment he considered turning back, but he wisely realized that it would do no good.

They rode on down the ravine at a walk for some distance, then left it where it made a bend and put their horses to a good swift lope. They could still hear firing back at the Clegg place, but there was no sign of anyone following them from that direction. All they had to fear now was that they might

encounter some party from the settlement going out to join the patrol around the meadow.

They passed two or three ranch houses, but apparently the alarm had not yet reached them, or else the men of the place were already away on the search. At the last place a rooster crowed as they flashed by, and soon the early morning challenge of the cock was being answered from every henyard for miles around.

"Yuh was later than I figgered," Lute said uneasily. "I wonder if it'll come daylight 'fore I git the horses back in the pasture?"

Joe asked how the horses had been obtained, and when Lute told him how Jack Binney had arranged things he suggested that they both go by way of the pasture to turn the horses loose there, and then walk to the schoolhouse.

"I'm afraid it'll be turnin' daylight before we kin git back," Lute objected.

"But it sure will before you can return if you take me to the schoolhouse first," Joe said.

"It won't matter much," Lute grinned. "All they got on me ain't worth more'n a few months in jail."

"A few days ago I was thinkin' life wasn't worth a damn because most everybody had turned against me," Joe remarked. "Why, the way you boys have stuck to me proves yuh're the best friends a man ever had. An' now there's old Wash—a nigger, an' almost a stranger—prob'ly dyin' back there tuh

help me git away. I never did have no kick comin'."

"An' yuh've got other friends," Lute added meaningly.

"Mebbe. But I ain't forgittin' that I got some enemies, too, an' my one big hope is tuh even the score with them. But I'm not goin' tuh have you take any chances that I won't take myself. Either we go tuh the pasture together, or we go tuh the schoolhouse together an 'turn the horses loose there," Joe announced.

"Mebbe we kin do that," Lute agreed. "Ole Split an' Rooster will head fer home, an' Jack or Walt will be lookin' fer 'em. Ain't likely anybody will notice the saddle marks."

They came to John Cleary's fence line, and soon after turned off the road and entered his field through a wire gate. They detoured widely behind his buildings, and then struck a trail through his field that led directly to the schoolhouse, and which was also concealed from the main road by a low hill.

Joe was more and more puzzled as to how they would be able to hide out successfully in the one public building in the community. But he had to take it on trust, and he had the evidence that Lute had been staying there for some time.

It was so near daybreak when they reached their destination that they dared not try to replace the

horses in the pasture. Gray streaks were fast shooting across the eastern sky, and Joe knew that as soon as the blood-mad posse discovered that he was not in the Clegg cabin that the entire country would once more be in a furore. They hastily unsaddled, but they took more time wiping all sweat and saddle stains from the horses' backs to the best of their ability. This completed they slapped the horses across their rumps with the bridle reins and sent them galloping down the road toward the Kidder ranch. Then they picked up their saddles and carried them toward a door of the schoolhouse.

"Welcome tuh yore new lodgin's," Lute grinned as he raised a latch.

The schoolhouse was built upon a sidehill. The main door was in the front and was reached by a flight of plank steps. But there was a sort of basement or cellar underneath that was used partly for a woodshed and partly for a storeroom. This was entered by a door in the side opening directly from the ground. It was this door which Lute entered, and Joe followed him back behind the corded piles of wood to the part where old desks and other such plunder was stored.

In a nook that had been skillfully screened off Joe found a bed, a desk to sit upon, a lamp and other useful utensils.

Lute had been showing the way by lighting matches, but now he lighted the lamp, and Joe

looked around with increasing amazement. The place was actually comfortable, and there were signs that it had been occupied for some time. Save only for the lack of daylight it was as home-like as the average bunkhouse.

"Yuh mean tuh say that yuh've lived here—for weeks!" Joe exclaimed. "An' never been discovered?"

"Ever since I had the row with King's men an' got my wing buster," Lute grinned.

"I don't savvy," Joe gave up, as he saw that Lute for some reason was not minded to tell how he managed things. The thing Joe was most interested in at the time was in getting out of his soggy, mud-encrusted garments, and if possible getting a bath. He was willing to risk almost anything for the sake of getting those things, but the means did not seem to be at hand.

"We'll do the best we can," Lute said when Joe explained his wants. "I'll heat some water so yuh can take a sponge bath, an' I got a clean union suit that yuh can put on, but I reckon yuh'll have tuh go tuh bed till I git a chance tuh send fer some o' yore own clothes."

To Joe's amazement the puncher upended a desk and climbing upon it pushed up a trap door that led to the schoolroom. When Lute disappeared Joe climbed to the desk and looked around. The door came up behind the teacher's desk, and close to it

was a small oil stove which Lute was lighting.

"I'll heat some water fer yore bath, an' then make us some coffee," Lute said carelessly.

"Yuh mean tuh say nobody ever comes here?" Joe demanded incredulously.

"Oh, there's one person comes here with grub most every day, but nobody else has happened around," Lute said. "Bein' that it's a quarter of a mile tuh the nearest house we ain't troubled with kids. But yuh'd better be takin' yore bath."

Joe was thankful enough to follow the advice. He stripped to the skin and washed himself thoroughly; then clad only in Lute's union suit he drank the coffee Lute handed down. The reaction from the tense hours of fatigue following the long strain of waiting now struck him with full force. He was sound asleep as soon as he struck Lute's blankets.

Hours later he was jarred awake by the hurried slamming of the trap door. He sat up, but it was several seconds before he could pry his eyelids apart. Then he made out Lute standing beside him.

"Heads down," Lute whispered. "Somebody comin'."

"I thought it was too glad tuh last," Joe murmured grimly. "Who is it?"

"It's Jim Rarick."

The blood leaped through Kidder's veins; a fiercely joyous thrill shot through his brain. He

rolled out of bed, and his bare feet touched the cold, dirt floor.

"Where's my clothes?" he demanded.

"I—I—buried 'em," Lute stammered. "They was so filthy I knew they couldn't be wore again."

Suddenly Joe heard the floor creak overhead as somebody walked over it. "Who's up there—anybody?" he asked.

"Yeah, Vivian Jackson," Lute confessed.

Joe gripped the puncher tightly by the shoulder. "Look here:" he said, "is it she who has been hidin' you, an' bringin' yuh grub?"

"Uh-huh," Lute acknowledged.

"Git them clothes off," Joe ordered crisply. "If only one of us can receive company it's goin' tuh be me."

XXVI

RARICK REPENTS

JIM RARICK had been several miles from the old Clegg place when he heard that Kidder and the negro were trapped there. He had rushed over there at once, and found the house still besieged.

The place was thoroughly surrounded and was fairly riddled with bullets. Yet when anyone ventured to try to get inside he was met with a bullet. The posse was taking its time, feeling sure that the victims could not escape, and confident that they could get their men by daylight without danger to themselves. This program did not suit Rarick.

"Bring 'em out right now," he said with an oath. "That old shack is no good, an' it'll burn like pitch kindlin' once yuh git a fire started."

"If yuh want a fire started, start 'er yoreself," drawled a man.

"Watch me," Rarick snapped.

While the members of the posse kept up a steady fire well toward the eaves of the building Rarick wormed his way along toward the side that had no

window or door. He was cautious, but there was no disputing the fact that he was performing an act which no one else present dared do. In one hand he carried a bunch of dry grass and small twigs. He made a little pile of these against the end of the house, and then reached around to find a few pieces of boards that had fallen from the dilapidated house and added them to the fire. Then he struck a match to the grass and hurriedly beat a retreat.

The fire was only a few minutes gaining headway, and once it got a good grip on the walls it spread out both ways until the whole building was a mass of flames.

The posse had drawn in closer as the flames leaped up, and there was a tigerish expression on the face of every man there. Every animal instinct in them ran riot as they waited with drawn guns; each one hoping that he would be the one to bring down the victims as they ran from the house.

And presently a man did emerge from the burning building; a man who staggered and fell, and then got up again only to fall face forward as his body was riddled by a dozen bullets.

The mob waited until the walls and roof of the old house collapsed before they gave it up that the other man was not coming out. By that time it was daylight and they crowded around as close as the heat would permit. They saw then that the man who had come forth was the negro.

"Well, yuh settled his hash, Jim," spoke up Burt Cahoon.

Rarick looked hungrily toward the ruins of the building, and a cold, triumphant smile settled over his features. Under those burning embers he was sure was the man he hated. It was almost as good as having Kidder hanged.

"Don't reckon we'll be able tuh look fer the other feller fer another day," hazarded a man. "It's gonna be hotter'n hell there fer a good many hours."

"I reckon Kidder'll keep in there all right," Rarick said brutally.

With the work of vengeance completed the mob spirit died out as quickly as it had arisen. Members of the posse, already half ashamed of the blood lust that had temporarily mastered them, began to slink away to their horses and then to their homes. Soon Jim Rarick, Comanche Charley, Burt Cahoon, and Sam Fullmer were all that were left. The last two, as though recognizing their inferiority to the master minds, stood back and waited for the others to speak.

"I think we can be purty big men in this country now, eh?" the half breed chuckled.

"Huh?" Rarick whirled, and his eyes narrowed. "Where d'ye git that we stuff?" he demanded. "You'll git paid, an' damn well paid, but I don't want yuh stickin' around the country after that."

"That's the talk, Jim," Sam Fullmer approved.

"I don't like this breed gittin' too damn familiar."

The breed's black eyes were suddenly malignant. "If I had some murder charges hangin' over me I wouldn't be stayin' either," he declared.

"By Gawd, if yuh ever dare squeal"—Fullmer roared.

"Then don't talk too easy about me leavin' the country," Comanche retorted. "I go when I git mine, but not before."

"It's cash I want too," suddenly declared Burt Cahoon. "When do we have a pay day?"

"Just as soon as I can sell the cattle," Rarick said.

"What about Pete Morton?" Cahoon asked. "We'll have tuh git rid o' him, won't we?"

"We can't," Rarick said. "That damn Kidder came near foolin' us after all by bein' where he couldn't possibly have killed Tony King. If we do away with Morton now an' then claim the cattle there may be a squawk. But he's an ignorant old bum, an' if we leave him alive we can just take the cattle an' let him roar. Better tuh have him the heir than anybody else."

"If he was gonna leave his property tuh any o' his men I don't see why he didn't leave it tuh me," Cahoon growled.

"Well, you go back tuh the ranch, an' explain tuh that lunk-head cook that ole Tony was practically broke, which was the reason he left his property to him. Tell him all the cattle belong tuh me, an' yuh

might remind him that if he makes a holler about anything he'll stand tuh be arrested for helpin' fugitives from justice, an' also for complicity in the murder of Tony King, accessory before an' after the fact as the lawyers say. That'll hold him, I reckon," Rarick directed.

"But yuh'd better cash in on them cattle purty pronto," Comanche Charley contributed with a leer.

"You'd better try tuh git a hold o' Tommy Racehorse an' a few more Injuns an' have 'em ready tuh help us stage a sudden round-up," Rarick said, evidently agreeing with the half breed's conclusion.

"An' you'd better see that that kid o' yore's keeps his mouth shut," the breed said insolently.

"I'll look after the kid without any advice from you," Rarick retorted coldly, and Comanche Charley turned away with a shrug. There was a point beyond which the half breed dared not go with his associate.

"Come on, Sam," Rarick said. "We'll let somebody else look for Kidder's bones when the ashes cool."

The men rode slowly away in three different directions; Rarick and Fullmer heading toward Rarick's ranch. Fullmer was a big, heavy-set young fellow, considerably shy as to brain power, but completely under the domination of the shrewd Rarick. Since the death of Bill Bunder, Fullmer was the only man whom Rarick could depend upon absolutely.

"I'm gittin' sick o' that damn breed," Fullmer exclaimed pettishly as they rode along.

Rarick smiled. "He'll blackmail us tuh death just as soon as we git our hands on any amount o' money—but we need his influence with the Indians yet awhile."

"Then what?" Fullmer demanded.

"Then we've gotta git him," Rarick said. "An' that goes for that bird Cahoon. He's loose-mouthed. He's already gone on record with everything that'll do us any good."

"I wonder how good he is with a gun," Fullmer said.

"Just ordinary. But neither you nor me can afford tuh monkey with him, or fall out with him in any way. But I think I know how tuh arrange the nicest little fight that ever happened in this country, an' if it pans out right there'll be two or three fellers less here, an' I hope Cahoon'll be one of 'em," Rarick smiled, a look of keen anticipation upon his face.

"As how, Jim?" Fullmer asked eagerly.

"Remember that silver cow o' King's?"

"Hell, everybody knows her," Fullmer stated emphatically.

"I want you tuh find that critter an' slap Joe Kidder's iron on her. Not the run together brand, mind, but Kidder's JK Connected," Rarick commanded.

"It'll be easy—I know where she runs—but what"——

"Then you find Jack Binney an' tell him you seen Cahoon brandin' her with Kidder's iron. Everybody knows she belonged tuh King, so yuh won't have tuh point out tuh Binney—him bein' no fool whatever yuh may think about him—that it's done with the deliberate purpose o' layin' it on tuh him so he can be sent tuh the penitentiary. With Kidder dead naturally Binney an' mebbe Hart will be blamed. If I don't miss my guess they'll declare war on Cahoon pronto," Rarick expounded.

Sam Fullmer pounded his leg with admiration and approval. "Damned if you ain't got a head on yer shoulders, Jim," he chuckled. "Nobody else could've pulled this whole deal off."

Rarick smirked, for he was not insensible to flattery. He was willing to keep Fullmer around for just that purpose, and because the fellow always obeyed orders without question or counter suggestion.

However, he soon dispatched Fullmer off for the range, while he returned to his own ranch. As he neared the place his brow knitted into a frown. It was not Comanche Charley nor Burt Cahoon that troubled him most, but his own son. Comanche Charley's warning against Dutch had rankled, for he knew that the boy had the absolute power to destroy him if he wanted to. He could not rest easy

in his mind until he knew beyond peradventure of a doubt that the boy would hold his tongue. How to accomplish that was the big question that confronted him.

Jim Rarick's conscience, if he had ever had any to boast of, had apparently been atrophied in its rudimentary state of development. The death or the sufferings of other people troubled him not at all. Under his smiling exterior was a heart that was cold as ice, except for one wee corner that contained all the affection that he was capable of feeling. He had never analyzed it, yet he did have a certain softness of feeling for his son. But when that son became a menace—he simply could not reason the matter out, his feelings were a matter that defied analysis.

He wondered if he should make an appeal to the boy's loyalty, or if it would be better to resort to threats. But when he got home his mind was almost instantly made up by the look which Dutch gave him. There was something of loathing in the boy's first glance which struck tinder to the man's hot temper.

"What the hell are you doin' stickin' around home so much?" Rarick demanded savagely. "Yuh got a horse. It seems tuh me a boy like you would be excited enough about the man hunt tuh git out an' see what was up anyway."

"Did yuh git Kidder—too?" the boy drawled.

Rarick knew well what the boy meant by that last word, and his face flamed an angry red. "Yes, by Gawd, we got Kidder—too. What've you got tuh say about it?"

"Yo're a good gitter, that's all," the boy said.

Rarick swung down from his horse and walked over to where the boy was sitting on the end of a projecting stable log. His face had gone white.

"Look here, Warren," he said—it was the first time he had called the boy by his real name in years —"you an' me have got tuh have an understandin', an' I don't like yore tone. I supposed yuh could be trusted, an' I didn't make no special effort tuh keep yuh from hearin' my plans, but—but"——

"I ain't told nobody nothin' have I?" the boy asked defiantly.

Rarick was a bit taken a-back. Dutch had not told, but that very fact had the effect of putting his father in the wrong, and consequently increasing his anger.

"Mebbe you ain't on purpose, but yuh spouted out a lot o' stuff the other night about me, an' Kidder was layin' there by the woodpile takin' it all in."

"An' now Kidder's dead," the boy said in an expressionless tone.

"An' for all I know yuh may be shootin' off again some time," Rarick said. "I recall yuh made some kind o' threats the other night if I didn't do so an' so. Lemme tell yuh right now that if yuh ever

breathe a word o' what you know that I'll plumb skin yuh alive."

"What d'ye mean," the boy began with assumed obtuseness, "about what I told yuh the other night, or about yuh killin' Tony King?"

Rarick's rage was by now well nigh uncontrollable. "So yuh've been spyin' on me, damn yuh," he gritted. He might have been able to control himself before, but this scared as well as infuriated him. If the boy knew this, was his one blind thought, he must be fixed so that he would forever keep silent.

There was a quirt belonging to Dutch hanging on a peg at the end of the stable and Rarick jerked it down, breaking the wrist thong in his haste to get a hold of it. Dutch started to run, but Rarick caught him by the arm and jerked him back. The quirt fell savagely across the boy's back, and burned like a hot iron.

Once having slipped the leash Rarick knew no restraint. The quirt rose and fell without mercy; the buckskin tail of it biting into the flesh and bringing blood with every blow.

At first the boy tried to endure the agony in stoical silence, but his tender flesh could not stand the pain. First tears came into his eyes, and he tried to break away. Then he began to shriek with agony.

"Shut up, damn yuh!" Rarick snarled, and ap-

plied the quirt with greater vigor in an effort to make the boy keep silent.

The blind, unreasoning passion continued until the boy suddenly fell to the ground in a faint. A fright that was as great as his anger had just been swept over Rarick. He dropped the quirt, and picking up his son carried him into the house.

A dash of water revived Dutch, but his eyes were dull and glassy and he groaned with pain. Rarick went outside and took a few turns in the yard. He was convinced now that Dutch would not die, but he had never been so frightened in his life. He felt that he must have been insane to have tried whipping the boy to make him keep still. Dutch had told him he would tell if ever he laid a hand upon him, and now he had put it up to the boy to make good. Why had he not believed him, and let well enough alone? It was the influence of that damn breed, he told himself furiously. If Comanche Charley had happened along then there would have been another murder.

Presently he regained some control of himself, but he was still frightened. With a shudder he realized that the only safe way to stop the boy's mouth was to kill him. And then the spark of humanity that had so long been dormant within him came to life. He knew that he could never again lay a hand upon Dutch. He could not have felt such abject shame had he not loved the boy.

Suddenly he rushed inside and threw himself on his knees beside the boy on the bed. "Forgive me, Dutch," he babbled. "I plumb lost my head. I'll never hit yuh again."

The boy said nothing. His eyes, beady from pain, rested upon his father's face unblinkingly, but what that expression meant Rarick could not guess. The man became almost incoherent as he continued to plead, but he failed to elicit a single word from his son.

At last Rarick got to his feet, his hysteria having spent itself. Soon, to all outward appearances he was his old, jaunty self. Fear gnawed at the core of his heart but he would never again show it. He went to the stove and built a fire.

"What d'ye want tuh eat, Dutch?" he queried once.

Dutch made no reply and Rarick shrugged his shoulders. When the meal was prepared Dutch refused to eat, but Rarick knew that the boy was really sick. It would be many an hour before Dutch recovered enough from his beating to be able to leave the ranch. By that time he hoped to have made his peace with the boy.

Rarick washed up the dishes, and finding Dutch still unwilling to talk he went outside and sat down to think. He was uncomfortable inside the house.

He was sure now that all his plans had turned out better than he had dared to hope for. He had had

his revenge, and he would soon be a rich man. There was only one thing more that he really wanted upon which he had made no progress. That was Vivian Jackson. The thought of the girl harked his mind back to Dutch. There was no question but that Dutch thought a lot of her. If he could persuade Vivian to marry him there would be small chance of Dutch ever talking. But it was a case demanding quick action. She had always treated him well; always appeared friendly, and yet he knew that he had inspired no passion within her. Indeed, he could no longer overlook certain signs that after all it was Joe Kidder she cared for. At that the old lurking, evil look came back into his eyes.

How had Lute Marsh managed to elude everybody so long? Why had Joe Kidder been sure that he would be hidden at Tony King's house, when King was his enemy? Rarick had thought much about those things, and had convinced himself that there was a go-between somewhere who had not been suspected. Certain little things inclined him to believe that Vivian was that person.

She had argued all the time that Kidder was innocent of the murders, and he recalled that at times she had questioned his own movements rather closely. Had she been trying to trap him, he wondered angrily.

She had appeared at Tony King's when Kidder

must have been hiding there, and there was no good reason for her presence. When it came right down to it what reason had there been for her remaining in the country at all that summer? She had wanted a quiet place in which to study, she had said; but why was it necessary for her to go to the schoolhouse and lock herself up there every day?

He had never thought to suspect her seriously before, but now that it was in his mind he began to see how a lot of strange things had happened—especially did he guess how Lute Marsh had eluded capture.

His lips curved into a smile that was not good to see. If his guess was correct and Lute was hidden in the schoolhouse he meant to give the teacher a scare that would make her willing to do about anything he asked.

XXVII

"FACE ME LIKE A MAN"

JIM RARICK did not have to wonder if Vivian was at the schoolhouse, for her little gray pony was tied at the hitchrack out in front. The teacher had never made any secret of the fact that she went there to study, nor of the fact that she wished to be unmolested, for she always kept the door locked.

It happened that there were just two keys to the schoolhouse—or supposed to be. Vivian had one and the Cleary's the other. Vivian had explained that she had misplaced her key, and had then borrowed the other one. Her own had been given to Lute Marsh.

Rarick tied his horse beside the girl's, but instead of going up the steps to the front door at once he walked around to the side door and tried it. It was barred on the inside and so resisted his efforts. He smiled grimly as he climbed the steps and knocked on the front door.

It was a minute or two before Vivian opened the door, and he noticed that she was pale. When he offered to shake hands she did so reluctantly.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Rarick?" she said nervously.

"Yuh're workin' too hard, Viv," he smiled. "Yuh're gittin' pale. Better lay off yore studies an' loaf with me the rest o' the day."

"Oh, I can't," she protested.

"Sure yuh can. I got a lot o' leisure now that Joe Kidder's been finished off—funny about him stayin' in that old shack an' bein' burned alive, wasn't it? Or hadn't you heard?"

If he had expected to find out whether she cared for Kidder by shocking her with his brutal statement he was disappointed. Her expression did not change, except for a look of scorn that came into her eyes.

"Yes, I heard," she said in a low tone. "They told me that you set fire to the house. It's hard to believe such things. They make one lose faith in human nature."

"Yuh ain't defendin' that coyote, are yuh?" he sneered.

"I always have defended Mr. Kidder. I've never believed he was guilty," she said firmly.

"Well, guilty or innocent it's just too bad for him now," Rarick laughed. "A few more days an' we expect tuh have all his crooked crew rounded up an' put away. Then this country'll be safe for an honest rancher again."

"All his crew—what do you mean?"

"Well, Jack Binney, Walt Hart, an' Lute Marsh tuh name 'em," he grinned. He was sure that he saw her eyelashes jerk apprehensively.

"Ain't yuh gonna ask me in?" he suggested.

"No," she said flatly.

"Too bad," he said lightly. "I hate tuh intrude on yuh, but bein' a trustee it's my duty tuh inspect things once in a while. I'm afraid o' fire, 'specially down in the basement where there's always a lot o' junk. I want tuh see if it needs cleanin' out."

There could be no doubt that he had struck home this time, for try as she might the girl could not conceal her nervous excitement.

"Co-come in, of course," she said hastily. "But —but I'm sure there is nothing needs cleaning out —at least not until school starts."

"It's the vacation time I'm scared of," Rarick declared. "Funny thing I noticed: The basement door is fastened on the inside. How does that come?"

He had stepped inside and was moving up the aisle toward the teacher's desk. Vivian did not step aside to let him pass but she moved slowly backward as he advanced.

"I—I—haven't been down there," she said. "Mr. Cleary said it should be fastened on the inside to keep prowlers out."

"An' I s'pose he's been in there ever since school closed," he jeered.

"There's a trap door behind my desk. He came up that way," she said faintly.

"An' that's the way I'll go down," he said.

"No! It—it's nailed down."

"Anyway, I'll have a look," he said, thoroughly enjoying her dilemma.

"No!" she said suddenly defiant. "I'm responsible for this schoolhouse, and if anything happens I'll pay for the damage."

"That's plumb generous of yuh," he sneered, his attitude changing suddenly. "How much has Kidder been payin' you fer actin' as a spy for him, an' for hidin' Lute Marsh out here in this buildin'?"

"Oh! Oh! You beast!" she cried. "You think I'd spy for money?"

"You have been spyin'—whether it was for money or whether it was because yuh was stuck on Kidder I don't know," he flared out. "Oh, I know why yuh been askin' me so many questions, an' I know why yuh was down tuh Tony King's the other day. An' I know yuh been hidin' Lute Marsh in here, an' I know he's here now. I know plenty tuh send you to the penitentiary for a good long stretch, my girl, for helpin' criminals. An' if yuh don't become Mrs. Jim Rarick in the next twenty-four hours over the road yuh go. Git me?"

Vivian had backed against the front of her desk, and there was a bewildered look on her face as she listened to his outburst. Suddenly she lunged for-

ward and caught Rarick by the sleeves of his shirt.

"Lute!" she screamed. "I'm holding him. Get on his horse and get away! Hurry! Hurry!!"

For all his innate cruelty Rarick had scruples about using violence against a woman. He would not strike her if he could help, but she had taken him completely by surprise. He tried to break loose, but she clung desperately. He wrenched one arm loose by a sudden violent movement that almost whirled her off her feet. Then the sleeve tore away in her other hand, and he started toward the door. With the quickness of a panther she was after him and seized him around the waist.

"Run, Lute, run!" she screamed again.

"My Gawd, let me go before I belt yuh one," Rarick snarled, but Vivian only clung to him the tighter.

In desperation Rarick seized the girl's fingers and unclasped them roughly. Being sure that Marsh was running for his horse, and having no time to lose he threw Vivian clear across the top of a desk into another aisle. Though disheveled and half stunned by the fall she got to her feet with the intention of still trying to detain him long enough for Lute to reach the horse and draw Rarick away before he discovered that Joe Kidder was in hiding there.

Rarick was almost to the door, and he had hurriedly drawn his gun as he ran, when he was halted

by a curt voice from behind the teacher's desk.

"Don't rush yoreself, Rarick," snapped the voice.

Rarick stopped as suddenly as though he had run against an unyielding stick, but he did not turn. He recognized Joe Kidder's voice, and though it was a terrific shock to him to hear it when he had supposed Kidder had been burned to death only a few hours before, his keen, alert mind kept him from letting that surprise betray him into a fatal move if it could be helped. He knew instinctively that he was safer for the moment with his back turned than if he whirled around and tried to shoot Kidder then and there. His ears were attuned to catch the slightest movement of his foe.

"Yuh won't find Lute out there," Joe said. "Turn around you low-lived dog an' face me like a man."

A challenge to his courage was the one thing Rarick could never stand. He had poised himself on his toes, and with uncanny swiftness he suddenly whirled and fired.

Quick as he was, however, he had not caught Joe by surprise. The instant Rarick started to turn Joe started to drop, and he was behind the teacher's desk when Rarick pulled the trigger. The bullet whistled harmlessly over his head and crashed into the back wall.

Joe thrust his gun over the top of the desk and rose up with a single swift motion. He had never been cooler in his life. For weeks he had been

wanting to clash with Jim Rarick, but he had had a lurking desire to fight it out to a finish with the man with his bare hands. Then when he was changing clothes with Lute he had heard how Jim Rarick had set fire to the shack where Wash White was holding the posse off, for Vivian had got the story from John Cleary. It had made him burn with a fierce desire to get his hands on Rarick's throat and throttle him. But when Rarick stood in the doorway talking to Vivian, Joe had raised the trap door enough to overhear everything that was said, and he realized then that the issue between them had gone beyond possibility of settlement with fists. Rarick himself was in too deadly a mood to think of anything except the death of his enemy, when he found to his consternation that Kidder was still alive.

The moment Joe bobbed up Rarick fired again, and their shots came almost as one. To Joe's amazement his gun left his hand and whizzed back behind the desk, and his whole arm seemed paralyzed. He had to think and act quick. If he tried to retrieve the gun with his other hand Rarick could empty his gun into him before he could straighten up. It had to be bare hands after all.

He vaulted to the top of the desk. Rarick had been coming down the aisle. Then Joe launched himself through the air with a mighty leap straight toward his enemy's head. Even in the air he had

time to wonder why Rarick had not shot again. Indeed the man had stopped, his gun still outstretched, but with a somewhat vacant look upon his face. A tiny trickle of blood oozing down his temple explained his inaction. Joe's bullet had glanced along the side of his head with force enough to make him dizzy, without, however, knocking him off his feet or doing him any serious damage.

Rarick suddenly shook his head as though to clear his eyes of the mist that had been forming before them, but before he could use his gun the human catapult was upon him, and he was knocked to the floor.

Joe had put everything into the leap to reach Rarick and he had no chance to save himself from a fall. All he hoped for was that Rarick would be under him when he came down. In that he was successful, but Rarick gave a wriggle and rolled from under.

Both men got to their feet slowly, for both were badly shaken up by their smashing fall. Joe's arm was still numb. Rarick's face twisted into a vicious grin as he again essayed to raise his gun. Just in time Joe struck out with his left hand and knocked the weapon aside. The bullet shattered a window. With an angry snarl and a blow that was almost feline in its speed Rarick struck with the gun barrel and it cut a gash corner-wise across Joe's forehead and staggered him back.

Joe heard the girl scream as he leaped in desperately to avoid another blow. He got his left arm inside Rarick's right one and around the back of his neck. He could not prevent Rarick from striking with the barrel of the gun, and it crashed against the back of his head a couple of times causing severe pain, but the man had no chance to make a swing and the blows lacked force to bring Joe down.

Joe suddenly stepped back and clasping the back of Rarick's head jerked the fellow off balance and toward him. He had to wrest the gun away from Rarick quickly, or make him drop it else it would be used with fatal results. He could feel the numbness leaving his right arm, and a tingling sensation taking its place. As he jerked Rarick forward his fingers shot down and closed about the wrist that held the gun and turned the muzzle away from him. His strength was enough greater than Rarick's to enable him to keep the gun that way, but he as yet had no arm to cope with his enemy's other one. And Jim Rarick's other fist now came up with a vicious uppercut. Joe ducked his head and avoided a knock-out, but caught the full force of the blow directly between the eyes. Smash! came the fist again, this time loosening some of Joe's front teeth.

Joe's head was swimming, but one thought was clear in his mind. This was his third and final clash with Jim Rarick. Thus far each one had a

victory to his credit, but this fight was to be to a finish. He gritted his teeth grimly and held on; every second he could feel the life coming back to his dead arm. He had to take what punishment Rarick was able to mete out until he got the use of it completely, and then he determined it would be his turn.

Vivian could see nothing but that battering fist smashing into Joe's unprotected face. She still held vividly in mind the last fight between these two when Joe had been beaten into unconsciousness, and she expected to see it happen again. She rushed back to the trap door crying, "Lute! Lute!" at the top of her voice.

Lute, barefooted, and clad only in his union suit, was half out of the door, but at the girl's approach he dropped back like a prairie dog going into his hole.

"Lute! Quick! Rarick is killing Joe!" the girl cried hysterically, standing over the open trap door and beckoning into the darkness below.

"Go on away," Lute yelled back. "I can't come up till you leave."

"Hurry," Vivian pleaded, and perhaps with some idea of helping Joe herself she started toward the combatants. Immediately Lute popped up like a jack-in-the-box, but unfortunately Vivian turned back just then to see if he was coming, and down he dropped again.

"Lute, you've got to come—he's killing Joe," she cried wildly, again trying to peer down into the cellar to see why he did not respond.

"Go on outside, for Gawd's sake! I ain't got no clothes on," Lute chattered.

"Come on, anyway. It's murder I tell you," the distracted girl gasped.

"Look out then—here I come," Lute said grimly, and his head appeared above the floor.

Vivian's horrified gaze was again fixed upon the fighting men as though she were hypnotized. Lute crawled out beside the desk, gun in hand, where he could see them; but they were now rolling about on the floor, partly in the aisle and partly under the desk, and he could see no opportunity to take a hand. He kept his gun ready to shoot if he got a chance at Rarick, but modesty forbade his leaving the shelter of the desk so long as the girl remained in the room.

Meantime Joe had been able to get the use of his other hand, and the first thing he did with it was to get his enemy by the throat. It diverted Rarick's mode of attack at once as those iron fingers closed over his wind-pipe. He tried to tear loose, and failing that he fell to the floor and thus managed to break the hold.

"Yo're my meat now, Kidder," Rarick breathed as he wrapped his legs around Joe and turned him under.

He was dealing with a man now, however, whose wrongs had bred a fighting energy that could not be resisted. Before he knew it Joe was on top again.

Neither man remained on top long, for Kidder's great strength offset Rarick's skill. The gun had dropped out of Rarick's hand when Joe began to choke him, but it had fallen in the aisle, and he had not given up hope of again getting his hands upon it. Suddenly they rolled toward it, and Rarick was just able to reach out and seize it by the barrel. He started to reverse it, but before he could accomplish it Joe's hand slapped against the handle and closed over it.

Desperately Rarick seized Joe's hand with his other one, trying to tear it loose, or hold it away. Then Joe rose to one knee and gave a mighty tug. For one instant the muzzle of the gun was pointed toward Rarick's white, strained face. And then it roared!

Joe knew that he had not consciously pulled the trigger; the pressure had really come from Rarick's own effort to turn the gun away. The bullet had struck Rarick under the chin, plowing through his mouth and lodging in his brain. The man was dead before Joe could get off of him.

Perhaps it was his fighting features, perhaps it was the effect of the bullet; but his face was twisted into a sardonic shape that betrayed every evil phase of his character.

XXVIII

THE RECOMPENSE

SLOWLY Joe got to his feet. He was conscious of victory, but he felt no savage thrill of exultation as he had on occasion felt in anticipation of such an outcome of his feud with Rarick. Rather, he found it in his heart to pity the man whom ingrained depravity had brought to destruction. Then he found Vivian Jackson looking at him with wide, horrified eyes, and he dropped his head with shame.

Again he had compelled her to know of his part in an affair of utter brutality. He knew that his appearance must be hideous for Rarick's fists had surely left their mark. Both his eyes and the bridge of his nose had already turned purple from Rarick's first solid blow, and there were smears of blood upon his face. He hated to face the girl, but he felt that an apology was due.

"I'm sorry this had tuh happen while you were here," he began tentatively. "Yuh've been powerful good tuh help Lute this way, an' I reckon I'd been dead or back in jail before this if it hadn't been fer you."

"I wanted to help you, Joe," she said. "I never did believe the things Rarick and others said about you. I stayed here this summer for no other reason."

"But what did you think you could do?" he asked, puzzled.

"When I went to see you in jail I also saw your lawyer. I asked him what I could do, and he said I could talk to Rarick and maybe get him to make some admissions. I didn't get him to, but I hope I've helped some," she said softly.

"Helped! Girl, I'll never be able tuh repay yuh, but what I can't see is how yuh come tuh do it!" Joe exclaimed.

"I guess there's just one reason for that," she said with a trace of a smile. Suddenly her eyes filled with tears, and tender words of pity for his bruised countenance came from her softly curved lips. With a clean linen handkerchief that was as feminine and as capable as herself she began to dab at his visible injuries. The gash on his forehead, the bumps on the back of his head, his blackened eyes, all secured her attention.

"I'm going to heat some water and fix up your wounds, and I don't want you to object," she smiled through the tears.

"But I will object," Joe said determinedly, "until you tell me what that one reason was."

For just a moment her head dropped upon his

shoulder. "I should think you could guess," she whispered.

Presently she escaped from his arms. "I—I'm going to wash your face," she said, reaching up to smooth her disheveled hair.

As they turned back toward the oil stove they saw the upper half of Lute Marsh's body looming up above the desk. His mouth had dropped open in an expression of complete amazement, but he suddenly came to life as he saw the girl's eyes upon him. His mouth closed like a steel trap and he went through the trap door with one tremendous leap.

The excitement of the deadly battle with Rarick, and the even more exciting discovery that Vivian Jackson loved him, had for the time being caused Joe to forget that the death of Rarick had further complicated matters for him, rather than solving any of his difficulties. He was still wanted; there was still no evidence to establish his innocence—and now they had a dead man on their hands to dispose of. And he knew, too, an overmastering fear that the enemy might now contrive to cause Vivian trouble. Rarick had threatened to send her to the penitentiary, and he was certain in his own mind that Comanche Charley knew everything that Rarick did.

"Look here, Vivian," he said—endearing names did not come easily to his tongue—"I want you tuh

git home just as quick as ever yore horse can git yuh, an' don't come back here again."

"But I'll have to," she protested. "How else can you get food?"

"We'll manage someway, but you're not to endanger yoreself again," he said authoritatively. "I think me an' Lute had better leave here anyway."

"Not without some clothes I don't leave," came a voice from the dark regions.

Joe thought a moment. Rarick's clothes were too small for either of them, and obviously Lute could not go out in broad daylight unattired. But something had to be done about Jim Rarick before the body was discovered in the schoolhouse, and a possible serious charge laid against Vivian and Lute. It seemed to him that there was but one thing for him to do.

"You go on home, Vivian, an' say nothin' about this," he said. "After while, I'll get over tuh the ranch an' ask Walt tuh bring some clothes here for Lute. Then Lute will have tuh git away as best he can, but I'll see to it that neither of you is ever suspected o' bein' around where Rarick was killed."

"Joe, what are you going to do?" Vivian queried apprehensively.

"I'm goin' tuh take Rarick's body over tuh the ranch, an' then give myself up," he said quietly.

"Joe, you'll not," Vivian protested vehemently. "They—they'll hang you."

"They'll probably do that little thing anyway, an' if I stick around here I'll only git you an' the boys into trouble."

The girl began to plead, and Lute, from the depths, began to argue. Joe's emotions were moved by their concern, but not his judgment.

"If I could get a hold of Comanche Charley again, or mebbe Sam Fullmer, I might make them come clean with the truth, but there ain't a chance I could git tuh either one of 'em now," he said sadly. "In fact," he went on, "I'd think the whole jail breakin' episode was a mistake if it wasn't for me findin' out one thing."

"I would have let you know that anyway," Vivian said as the rosy color stole into her cheeks.

When Vivian had finished her ministrations Joe picked up his hat and started toward the now stiffening corpse. The girl's face had gone colorless as paper. Suddenly he turned back and clasped her in his arms. For a long minute they clung to each other speechlessly. Then he kissed her, and pushing her gently into a seat he picked up Rarick's body and stalked out through the door with it.

Vivian sobbed quietly.

XXIX

A FIGHT TO THE FINISH

NELLIE HART was the first to see the strange sight coming across the meadow to the Kidder ranch-house. It was easy to see that it was a man walking ahead of a horse which seemed to be burdened with some strange, grotesque object.

"Walt," she called to her husband, "ain't that Jim Rarick's big brown saddle horse?"

The men had just eaten supper, and tall Walt Hart came out hatless, and picking his teeth.

"It is," he said, "but that ain't Rarick leadin' him. It almost looks like—but it couldn't be."

"I can't see why Vivian hasn't been over to let us know whether Joe got away or not," the wife said. "I just can't believe that he was burned to death."

"Me neither, but at least them thinkin' so has left us free from the damn spies for the first time in ages—unless this is more trouble comin'." A moment later the young ranch foreman stiffened as he recognized what that strange burden across the saddle was. The sun was just about to set,

and the slanting rays were beating into the face of the man approaching in such a way that they could not distinguish his features. His walk looked familiar, but he was almost to the bridge in front of the house before Walt recognized that the battered features belonged to the owner of the ranch.

"It's Joe, all right," Walt said quietly, but with his voice vibrant with suppressed excitement. "An' I'm bettin' my back wages that the thing on that horse is Jim Rarick."

It did not take very long for his guess to be verified.

"Hello, folks," Joe greeted, his face breaking into a grin at their evident consternation.

Hart rushed out and gripped his employer's hand. For a moment he was too choked up to speak. "We—we didn't know for sure yuh wasn't killed last night," he got out finally. "Yuh're wearin' Lute's clothes, an' from the looks o' yore face yuh musta been through the war right."

"How're you, Nellie?" Joe asked, as he shook hands with Mrs. Hart. Though he knew his stay must be brief it warmed his heart to be back home, and to receive a cordial welcome from his own people—he thought of them as friends and not as employees.

"I'll set out some supper for you right away, Joe," Mrs. Hart said, as her husband waved her toward the house.

"What about—this?" Walt asked with a nod toward the corpse.

"Well—we come together again, an' this time it went tuh a finish," Joe said quietly. "We'll have tuh put him on a bed, an' I want tuh git some of my own clothes on before they suspect Lute. Then you had better ride over to Cleary's an' phone tuh the sheriff. I'm givin' myself up."

"But yuh can't do that. This here—with the rest—will hang yuh shore," Walt protested. "Was there any witnesses?"

"None that can testify," Joe said shortly.

They got the body into the house, and Walt got Rarick's horse out of sight. Joe was eating supper when he returned, and the young foreman was in no hurry about notifying the sheriff.

Joe had just finished eating when Jack Binney rode in at a gallop, flung himself from his horse and dashed into the house excitedly.

"By Gawd, Walt, do yuh know what they've done?" he demanded. "They've framed you an' me now fer cattle stealin'——" His eyes suddenly rested upon Joe and his face went blank.

"Hello, Jack," Joe said mildly. "Nellie'll be gittin' mad if we keep droppin' in for supper at all hours like this."

There were tears in Binney's eyes as he wrung his employer's hand. "What're yuh goin' tuh do, Joe?" he asked.

"I was aimin' tuh give myself up, but I'm curious tuh know what this frame-up is against you boys first," Joe answered.

"I met Sam Fullmer today an' he told me I'd better have a look at that silver cow an' her calves; that he's just seen Burt Cahoon an' two other King men havin' a look at her. From the look in his eye I knew there was some cussedness afloat, so I went around where he told me she was—an' they was all branded with the JK Connected. Even the right young calf had it," Jack said.

"Why didn't yuh add the Bar-Dash?" Walt asked.

"Because I won't dirty my hands with crooked brands even tuh save my own skin," Jack declared. "I hunted up Fullmer an' asked him tuh be a witness, an' he laughed an' said he dassn't. He told me he'd seen Cahoon while I was huntin' the cow an' that Cahoon told him he was goin' tuh swear that him an' Eric Glines an' Ad Ferner saw me an' you brandin' 'em."

"An' what was yuh plannin' tuh do?" Joe asked.

"I was plannin' tuh take Walt an' go up tuh King's camp an' have it out with them fellers," Jack said.

"An' by Gawd it's what we'll do," Walt said furiously.

"I believe we'll wait a few hours before we notify the sheriff about Rarick," Joe said thoughtfully.

Just as it was turning daybreak the next morning

Joe, Jack and Walt rode up to Sam Fullmer's camp. They were leading Jim Rarick's horse, with the saddle still upon it, behind them. Fullmer was sleeping outside, but when he awoke they were too close for him to attempt to run if he had wanted to. He got his gun out from under the pillow, but did not attempt to get up. Joe, purposely staying a little behind, and with the brim of his hat pulled over his eyes, was not immediately recognized. Neither did Fullmer seem to notice Rarick's horse.

"Ridin' early ain't yuh?" he greeted them.

"Some; but we wanted tuh git here before yuh left," Jack replied. "Don't make any mistake an' try tuh use that gun yuh got there."

"What's the idee?" Fullmer blustered.

"The idee is simply this," Joe said, suddenly spurring forward and raising his hat. "Jim Rarick has passed out an' we know now that it was you an' Bill Bunder who killed those Injun police. Either you come clean or you can foller Rarick over the hump. But you'll go at the end of a rope."

The man's eyes rested upon Rarick's familiar horse and saddle. Fear came into his eyes, but also obstinacy.

"You go tuh hell," he snarled.

"Tie him up tuh think it over till we come back," Joe said, his gun suddenly covering the man on the ground.

In a few moments the undressed man was rolled

tightly in a blanket and lashed up securely with a lasso rope. Then the three turned and galloped rapidly toward the King camp, about three miles distant.

Cahoon, and the other two punchers then at the camp were up but they had not breakfasted. It was not possible to surprise them, but the appearance of Joe Kidder, whom they had supposed dead, had almost the same effect. They did not try to leave their camp-fire, but their hands dropped to their guns.

The other three stopped their horses within a couple of rods of the fire. "Well, Burt, I see yuh got outa the mud all right," Joe said.

The man rasped out an oath. "What the hell d'ye want here?" Cahoon growled.

"For one thing we rode over tuh thank yuh for puttin' my brand on that silver cow an' her calves," Joe said. "I always hated tuh do it myself, though they properly belonged tuh me for winterin' 'em."

The three exchanged startled glances. "I don't know what yuh mean, but we never branded no silver cow," Cahoon denied.

"Sam Fullmer told Jack here that he watched yuh do it. Sam's all trussed up over tuh his camp by the way, an' it may interest yuh tuh know that Jim Rarick's dead. It was a nice little scheme yuh had cooked up among yuh, but it's played out," Joe said.

"We dunno what yo're talkin' about," Cahoon

said huskily, his face livid with anger and hatred, and his eyes trying to reach an understanding with the two punchers who had been helping him to betray their employer.

"I don't accuse you of murderin' anybody, although Glines an' Ferner here did try tuh kill Lute Marsh, an' you were back of 'em. It was Fullmer an' Bunder who killed the Indians, Rarick who murdered Vick Yoakes, an' Comanche Charley who stabbed Bill Bunder tuh death. But I do think you three helped Rarick an' his outfit misbrand the cattle, an' now I think yuh meant tuh steal from Tony as well as me. An' Tony's death is still tuh be accounted for. I shouldn't be surprised if you wasn't responsible for that. But all we want now is for yuh tuh go over tuh Fullmer's camp with us. If he don't come clean with everything we'll give you the pleasure of hangin' him. I'm sure that'll open his mouth if anything will," Joe told them, talking slowly and deliberately, his every word convincing them that he was talking with a deep and determined purpose.

Cahoon could not figure things out on such short notice, but it was apparent to him that things had gone wrong. Rarick's horse and saddle proved to him that Joe was telling the truth about Rarick being dead, and he had no faith in anyone else being able to straighten things out for them. And he knew that if he and his friends were forced to start

stringing Fullmer up that the fellow would avenge himself upon them by telling the truth. He decided to risk shooting it out.

"About that silver cow," he said evenly, "we didn't stick no iron on her, but if she's wearin' yore brand it proves yore outfit stole her, for everybody knows she belonged tuh King."

He had half turned toward Glines and Ferner as he spoke, and gave them a significant wink. Then, straightening suddenly he jerked his gun. The other two did the same.

The three on horseback were expecting the move, but as the others were the ones who took the initiative Joe and his friends were at a slight disadvantage. Jack and Walt were both nervous, for neither had ever been in a gun fight. Joe had thought the situation over, and he knew that Walt Hart was in the most danger, for Walt was slow of movement. Moreover, Walt's death would be more of a tragedy than his own, for Walt was married. Joe had sized it up, and decided that if the men on the ground did decide to fight it out that Cahoon would try to get him, Glines would try to take Walt because he was the closest to him, while Jack Binney would be left to Ferner, the least formidable of the three. Joe felt that Jack had more than an even break, and he was not worried about himself.

As the guns came up Joe gouged his horse viciously with the spurs in hopes that the sudden

start would cause Cahoon to miss. At the same time he pulled trigger the moment his gun was pointed at Glines. A startled expression came over the man's face. He pulled the trigger of his gun, but it was not pointed at anything. Walt's gun was not yet out of the holster, and Joe's timely shot alone had saved his life.

Joe had felt the breath of Cahoon's bullet past his ear, but the leap of his horse had carried him to such an angle that he had to turn it around before he could fire at Cahoon. Other guns were now barking, and a bullet tore the leather from the cantle of his saddle as he turned his excited horse around. He saw the man Ferner on the ground even as he threw down on Cahoon, but two other shots came simultaneously with his, and Cahoon dropped to the ground with three bullets in his body. Jack Binney had got his man with the first shot, and both he and Walt had fired at Cahoon the same time Joe did.

They had not received a scratch, and all three outlaws were dead.

XXX

A PIECE OF SILVER

IT took some time to round up the K-Bar-Dash caviya, and still more time to catch three gentle horses upon which the bodies of the dead men could be loaded. They had to travel slowly back to Sam Fullmer's camp, and the sun was climbing high before they reached there.

The first thing they noticed was Fullmer's absence. The blanket he had been rolled in was there, but man and rope were gone.

"He didn't git loose himself," declared Jack, who had done the tying.

"We overlooked a bet," Joe said regretfully. "It seems plain tuh me that there's a band o' Indians camped close around here, an' they musta come tuh Fullmer's camp tuh beg something for breakfast."

"Then if that's the case we'd better be linin' outa here," Walt opined, and the others agreed with him readily.

With some difficulty they got the horses carrying the gruesome burdens into a trot, and they headed back toward the ranch.

They were still several miles from the ranch when

they saw forty or fifty men top a ridge behind them, and the group was riding like mad.

"Comanche Charley an' a bunch o' Injuns," Jack said. "We'd better ride. That outfit would like nothin' better than wipin' us out."

"You boys go on," Joe ordered. "I'll lead these ponies along till they overtake me, an' then I'll try tuh argue with 'em."

"Like hell," both men declared in unison. "Either we let 'em have these stiffs an' we all run for it, or else we all stay."

Joe realized that orders from him would have no effect, and he knew that it would do no permanent good to try to get away. As long as they had to face the Indians they had as well do it there as anywhere. He had little hope of being able to convince the Indians that he had not murdered their policemen, but all he could do was make the attempt.

They continued to ride on at a trot, as though paying no attention to the Indians galloping behind them. Then, just before the Indians overhauled them they saw a cloud of dust from the other direction rapidly approaching.

"It wouldn't have done us any good tuh run, because we're surrounded anyway," Joe said laconically.

Both parties reached them at about the same time. At the head of the Indians were Comanche Charley, Sam Fullmer, and Tommy Racehorse.

This was not surprising. But it was amazing to Joe to see Vivian Jackson at the head of the other party.

Close beside the girl was Dutch Rarick, and behind them were most of the steady ranchers of the vicinity. Somebody had been very, very busy.

The presence of the party of ranchers alone kept the Indians from trying to kill Joe at once. As it was they gathered around sullenly, while Comanche Charley became their spokesman.

"So yuh've been killin' some more men have yuh, Kidder?" he said truculently. "I thought we had yuh planted under some hot ashes, but I reckon yuh won't pull no more crimes after this."

"Yuh think not?" Joe retorted, undismayed. "Yuh may have the whip hand right now, but we know the truth, an' some day we'll prove it."

"We'll prove it right now," Vivian Jackson spoke up. Strangely enough she directed her remarks straight to the Indian, Tommy Racehorse.

"Joe Kidder didn't kill those Indian policemen," she said, her voice trembling with excitement despite her effort to remain cool. "There is one of the men who murdered them," she said, pointing at Sam Fullmer. "Bill Bunder was the other murderer, and the man who had them do it was that fellow." Her accusing finger now indicated the half breed.

"Prove somethin', why don't yuh?" Comanche Charley leered.

"I will," the girl stated. "Jim Rarick and you planned it all in order to even up with Joe Kidder for fancied injuries, and then you planned to steal all his and Tony King's cattle. You took Burt Cahoon and two more of King's men in with you to help misbrand all the stock of both outfits. You had to get King out of the way and you and Rarick murdered him. You were both hiding in a clump of pines close to Rarick's place when Tony came along, and Rarick fired the shot that killed him."

The breed's eyes rested upon Dutch Rarick's face, and his features twisted into a grimace of hate. "If that damn kid"—— he gritted, his hand moving stealthily toward his gun.

"Yah, you can't scare me," Dutch said shrilly. "My dad damn near killed me yesterday tuh keep me from tellin', an' he done it just because you put him up to it, yuh slimy snake. But I told him if he ever laid a hand on me I'd tell it all, an' I have. Sam Fullmer knows it was him an' Bunder killed the Injuns an' he dassn't deny it."

Comanche Charley's hand streaked down for his knife. Had he touched it he would have died the next moment, for Joe Kidder's gun was trained upon him, and had been from the first, though it had never left the holster. But before the breed's hand clutched the knife his wrist was seized by Tommy Racehorse.

"This boy—he talk straight?" the Indian de-

manded, his glittering eyes fixed upon the breed's face with the intensity of a snake's.

"Fullmer an' Bunder killed 'em all right, but I had nothin' tuh do with it," Comanche Charley said. "It was the kid's dad who ordered 'em killed."

"Him an' dad planned it all," Dutch said. "It started when Comanche Charley seen Tony King buy that silver cow. They seen a chance tuh make King an' Kidder fall out, an' afterward they thought o' combinin' them brands an' gittin' all the cattle."

"Look here!" Sam Fullmer bawled out angrily, "that breed can't blame me fer anything an' crawl from under himself. I did kill the damn Injuns, because me an' Bunder had been fool enough tuh steal cattle an' let this cur an' Jim Rarick git the goods on us. But the kid's right, an' it was Comanche who told us where an' how tuh kill the Injuns."

"An' I reckon yuh'll have tuh stand trial for killin' Bill Bunder," Joe spoke up. "I happened tuh see you do that, you know."

"An' he helped kill Tony King," Dutch put in. "I saw 'em do that. He was just as much tuh blame as my dad was."

Tommy Racehorse turned to his followers and talked to them rapidly in their own tongue. While this was going on Joe Kidder's neighbors began to crowd around him. John Cleary acted as their spokesman.

"Joe," he said apologetically, "I reckon we're all plumb ashamed o' the way we've treated yuh, an' if they try tuh cause yuh any trouble on account o' breakin' jail, or anything that's happened afterward the whole community'll be behind yuh to a man."

"Thanks, boys," Joe said cheerfully. "I don't believe in holdin' a grudge, an' I ain't worryin' about what they'll do tuh me. I'm ready tuh defend anything I've done. All I ask is a hearin'."

Tommy Racehorse now turned to the white men and began to speak. "One Injun p'lice he my uncle," he said. "White man kill-um, but Injun let white man law fix him. This man"—he indicated Comanche Charley— "he Injun, an' he heap guilty too. Injun law fix him."

A dozen of the Indians surged around and surrounded the half breed. The man began to scream for the white men to rescue him, but his captors quickly shut him up. The Indians wheeled their horses so that the breed was in the center of a great cordon, and thus they started away. The white men tried to protest, but to have attempted to rescue the man would have precipitated a bloody battle, and the Indians outnumbered them two to one. They were compelled to yield.

A few days later the body of Comanche Charley was found where he had been stabbed to death. None of the wounds were very deep. The knife

had been dull, and he had not died quickly. The wielder of the knife was never brought to trial.

One week later Joe Kidder was completely exonerated. He and Vivian were married before they left the courthouse. The first man to congratulate them was old Pete Morton.

"I reckon you an' me won't have no trouble separatin' our cattle, Joe, because the brand scars are still fresh enough tuh be sorted out," the old cook remarked after the felicitations had been passed.

"That makes me very happy, Pete," Vivian told him. "But when I come to see you again I don't want you to tell me that you won't cook for strangers."

"You get fresh with me, young woman," the old fellow said with mock ferocity, "an' I'll send that husband o' yours over the road for stealin' my silver cow. She's got his brand on, remember."

"Try provin' that cow belongs tuh you," Joe smiled.

"Why, she's carryin' Tony King's half dollar inside her leg, ain't she?" Pete demanded.

From his vest pocket Joe took a blackened silver half dollar. "Here's the evidence," he smiled, "but you'll have a hard time provin' where it come from."

THE END